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FOURLING: FOUR SHORT STORIES

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Fourling: Four Short Stories, submitted by Bryan Moon in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Supervisor

Date April 25, 1978

Ultimately the stories included here will be parts of two longer works. "Dark Armies" and "Charge of the Light Brigade" are the first and fourth of a series of five stories which centre on the character Samuel. The "Prologue" and "The Student Prince," and "The Last Days of Billy's Empire" and the "Epilogue" are the beginning and end of a series of stories narrated by the character Jonathan W. Corning. Although these stories are to be parts of more extended pieces of work, they have been written in a fashion that allows them to be read independently.

Although there are four different stories, they share certain concerns. In a story not included here, Samuel and an old man are standing in front of the tiger's cage at the zoo. The boy is upset for a variety of reasons, and to console him the old man says, "Match the tiger to the bars and you will be free." Presumably what the old man means is that if you match the tiger's stripes with the bars of the cage, then through a trick of perception the bars will disappear and the tiger will momentarily seem to be free. In the story the incident is not as cryptic as it may seem to be here, but it is useful to mention it at this point because in many ways these stories deal with matching the tiger to the bars. Among other things, the stories deal with matching perception to reality, words to actuality, the individual to society, and the reader to the writer. To make such a list of critical cliches is harmfully general, but the issues are given a certain amount of particularity in the stories which follow.

Little can be said here about the form of these stories. Perhaps the only statement concerning form that can be made with any assurance is that the complexities developed by a piece of fiction must be resolved by that fiction. It is useful to note, however, that the

author's views on the writing of fiction are almost always exactly the opposite to those expressed by Jonathan W. Corning, the main character in two of the stories that are included here.

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DARK ARMIES

Rob was up in the tree. And he wouldn't come down. Sam knew he wouldn't come down. Twilight had filled the tree with shadows, but Sam knew that Rob would be sitting in the crotch of the third big branch, one arm wrapped around the trunk, the other up to his mouth. He would be sucking his thumb. His trigger finger would be stroking his nose. He was supposed to have given up thumb sucking when he was six, but he still forgot at certain times. His hand would rise towards his mouth, drop, then rise again, each time higher, until he was finally sucking it.

Sam had a picture on his wall at home from the time they had gone to the opening of the new monkey house at the zoo. In the picture a baby chimpanzee was riding piggyback on its mother. Its head was turned to the camera and it was sucking its thumb. The title of the picture was 'Mother and Child.' He thought of mentioning the resemblance to Rob to get some kind of response, but decided against it. Rob had been kind of touchy about thumb sucking lately. Sam tried again.

"Hey Rob."

No response.

"Hey Rob. What do ya wanna do till the concert starts?"

There was silence, and then a disembodied voice came down from the shadows of the tree. "I dunno."

"Well we could go hide on Christopher out on the boulevard." Christopher was Rob's younger brother. They were Sam's cousins.

"Naw. I don't wanna."

"Well what do ya wanna do?"

"Nothin."

Sam went back and sat down on the cottage steps. He knew there was nothing to be done when Rob became quiet. It was like trying to open his mother's green-stone jewelry box. Rob became maddeningly smooth, and Sam did not know the right place to press. None of the favourite pastimes or conversations would work. The last time his parents had been up he had asked his father why Rob became so quiet. His father had just said that different people do different things. He had tried asking his aunt Elizabeth last week.

Sam and Rob had been down on the beach watching the men assemble the rides of the small carnival that set up by the pier each summer. Rob had stood, one arm across his chest and the other arm resting on it, sucking his thumb, and taking less and less notice of what Sam was saying. The huge spines of the Whirly Bug had unfolded one by one like a great metal flower. The sun had nearly gone down and the breeze had started from off the lake before Sam gave up trying to get Rob to go back to the cottage and had gone back alone. His aunt had been worried and angry, but when she and Sam returned to the beach they stopped fifty yards up the beach from the pier. The Whirly Bug had become a many-armed silhouette, and Rob, still rooted in the sand beside it, was no more than a shadow. He had asked her then why Rob was the way he was. She had stood looking for a while and then in a sad way had said Rob was so like his father, interested in mechanical things.

She had been sad in the same sort of way this afternoon when she had finally given them permission to go to the concert at Rainbow Hall. Rob had wanted to go each Sunday all summer, but now, instead of being happy, he was just sitting up in the tree.

A car wheeled up the other side of the street, turned around

the boulevard of trees, and drove past the cottage. It was the first of a nightly parade that turned around and around the island of trees in the centre of the street. Sam looked up. Two girls were sitting on the convertible back, and when the car had passed the yard seemed darker. There were sounds coming from the far end of the street, from the Rainbow Hall. He could hear laughter thinned by two blocks of night air so that just the essence of sound was there. Yellow. Cars without mufflers rumbled beside the laughter. A kind of red. Sitting in the darkness, Sam suddenly caught a glimpse of why Rob wanted to go there so badly.

A bat appeared, looped the loop over the centre of the yard, and then disappeared, as if tying a knot with an invisible string and pulling it tight. The porch light came on behind Sam, shining through the screen. He turned and it was his aunt.

"Where's Rob?"

"He's up in the tree." A moth attracted by the light from inside feathered circles on the screen around her dark outline.

"Well you get him and wash up. The concert starts in half an hour." He could hear the smile in her voice. He went over to the tree.

"Hey Rob."

Rob had already shinnied down.

"I heard." He walked by into the cottage and quietly closed the screen door. Sam was left standing confused in the yard.

They changed from shorts to long pants and went into the kitchen to wash up. They took turns in front of the basin, first washing their faces, then combing their hair. Sam took time with his hair. Finally it was watered down, the part almost straight. Usually washing up in the kitchen meant the arrival of his parents or a movie at the Lux,

but tonight there was no excited laughter at the inevitable trickle of water down the back of his neck. Looking in the mirror he saw his hair was getting long. Tomorrow, when his parents came up, he would probably be told to get a hair cut. Suddenly he missed them and wished they were there. Finally they put on shoes, and feeling awkward and new, walked to the front room.

Sam stood in the kitchen doorway while his Aunt Elizabeth brought out her purse and gave the ticket money to Rob. Sam looked at her sitting on the dusty red couch and wished for a minute she had said they couldn't go. He thought of Christopher and Elizabeth-Jane who were too young to go, sulking and reading comic books in the top bunk, and he wished for a minute that he could change places with them. The clap of the screen door then drew him out into the night.

Rob was waiting for him by the tree. "When we get there, Sam, don't act like a little kid."

"What do ya mean?"

"Don't act like a little kid or they won't let us in." Rob started walking.

"I'm as old as you are. What do ya wanna go down there for anyways?"

Rob stopped and turned around. "Nobody said you had to come."

Suddenly the night was as quiet as Sam's indrawn sigh. They stood still for a moment, and then Rob said he was sorry. They started walking.

The way to the Rainbow Hall was also the way to the beach. They had walked it many, many times barefoot. First there were just summer cabins with long grass spidering from the cracks of the sidewalk,

and balls and baseball bats to be stepped around. Sam noticed there was cottonwood fluff sticking to Rob's wet hair. He started to smile and stopped. He started to tell Rob, and then decided against that as well.

They were passing the first all-year house. It was a square, high, sandstone house right up at the front of the lot. It was the Watella house. The Watellas were crazy. Apart from size, each of them was an exact copy of the rest of the family, lank, blond and dirty. Summer people coming back to their cottages viewed anything stolen or damaged as work of the Watellas. It was rumored that there were two children who were normal and lived somewhere else. Celebrating the birth of his second child, Father Watella had gotten drunk and walked out of the second story door. It opened into mid-air. Either the stairs had never been built, or they had rotted away. He had fallen to the sidewalk, and every child after that had been strange.

Walking barefoot to the beach, stepping carefully on the broken sidewalk, Sam and Rob always looked up to the second story and wondered what he looked like. They had in fact seen him, but chose rather to believe that he was crippled and crazy and worth the trouble of watching the Watellas' outhouse in hopes of seeing him. Tonight, because the lights were on, they were able to see inside the house. One of the Watella kids was combing his hair, bent down because the top of the mirror was cracked. There was a calendar on the wall with a lady in a bathing suit, and a picture of Jesus with words written underneath in sequins. It looked like an interesting place. It occurred to Sam that the Watella combing his hair was the one who would sing. He had heard that every Sunday night there was one of them who sang at the concert.

"I'll bet that's him."

"Who?"

"The one who sings every Sunday."

Rob shrugged it off. "Who knows."

Sam suddenly did not want to argue so instead he started a variation of one of their favorite conversations.

"It didn't look so bad in there. It would be good to live by the lake all year."

Rob did not reply the way he was supposed to. "They have to go out to the outhouse in the winter."

"No they don't. They just do in the summer." It sounded weak to Sam even as he said it.

"How do you know?"

"We've never seen the old man go out back so they must have a bathroom." And even as he said it Sam knew that they did have to go out back in the winter.

"We've seen him, we just said we didn't."

Sam was quiet then. They were passing Tired Ann's. It didn't look like a grocery store. The only way you could tell was by the metal bar across the door saying Coca Cola. It used to be just a private house, and it was very well taken care of. They never had to watch where they stepped when passing because Tired Ann swept her walk every day. The summer before they had always stopped in on their way to the beach, but at the beginning of this summer she had told them never to come back.

They had stopped the day after seeing 'The Queen of Sheba' at the Lux. They had stood just inside the door, smelling the fruit smell of the oiled wood floor while their eyes became accustomed to the dimness. Tired Ann took longer than usual coming out of the back room, and the

boys began a routine that had gone on since seeing the show. Sam held his nose and made a sound like a clarinet, and Rob moved his thumb like a belly dancer. His thumb was double jointed so that when he bent it the wrong way a surprising bulge appeared in the palm of his hand. Tired Ann had shuffled out of her back room, one hand holding her housecoat closed, and stopped dead. For the first time since they had been going there her eyes had quickened and some of the shadow had left her face.

"What's the matter with your hand?"

Both boys sputtered with laughter, and her eyes had quickened even more. She seemed to expand in the dim light of the store.

"You get out of here. And don't come back. I don't have time for smart boys and if your mother wants to know why I'll tell her. Now get out."

She took a step toward them and they had backed out of the store scared and confused.

Now Sam was thinking it would be all right to live at Tired Ann's. She didn't have an outhouse. But before he made up his mind to speak, Rob spoke.

"You know why Tired Ann's so mean?" There was conciliation in his voice, but Sam missed it and Rob went on. "She's got cancer. I heard them talking in the front room. She's gonna die."

Silent, they walked across the street, the heels of their shoes making round half moon craters instead of the two easy circles of a bare foot. There was none of the special suspense of wondering whether the tar would stick to their feet, and none of the relief when their feet rose just as they seemed about to stick. They walked by the last two front yards of the old all-year people, not needing to worry about

bruising their heels on the hard spiky tufts of trimmed down grass in the cracks of the sidewalk. Finally they approached the Rainbow Hall through the glinting sand of broken glass, for once not speculating how much money they would have if they collected all the bottles broken there. And then, instead of running hot footed and puppet-like across the pavement and down the hotter sand into the water, they stopped beneath the three rows of flickering coloured lights that arched down over the entrance to the Rainbow Hall.

The lights flickered red, blue, and yellow. They almost made a singing sound, a burning sound. Sam looked up and saw bugs hitting against the row of yellow lights, and for a moment he thought the sound he heard was their bodies striking the bulbs. There was the throat catching smell of dust burning. He shuffled in behind Rob and stood silent while Rob put the dollar in the shoebox, gesturing, "Him and me."

The man took each of their right hands in turn and stamped a figure eight on them. "If you leave and want to get back in, show your hand." They stepped inside the hall.

Sam was prepared for everything but what he saw. There was no colour inside the Rainbow Hall. It was not even a perfect black. It was like his Uncle's barn, and it smelled like the cottage after it had been closed all winter, but far away at the other end of the hall, framed just like a picture, there was a stage. It was the first real stage either had ever seen. They walked slowly to where the rows of seats began, their eyes becoming accustomed to the light. Rob turned to Sam.

"Let's sit near the front."

Sam followed reluctantly wondering how Rob, who was afraid to walk on the slick wood of the pier on rainy days, could step so surely

past the rows of people. Sam stumbled once on the uneven floorboards, and when they finally sat down he ran his fingers over the frayed wooden bench, tracing initials. He searched for something to say to show that he too could be casual, but Rob spoke first.

"They're drinking."

Sam looked down the row and saw the gleam of a bottle being passed and tilted. Rob told him not to stare and he turned back to the stage, silent.

The light changed to blue on the stage and a man in a shimmering silvery suit came out.

"Welcome. Welcome all to another Sunday evening concert at Rainbow Hall. Tonight I have the pleasure of introducing some exciting new talent as well as some faces you've seen before. Sit back and enjoy yourselves. I'm Ronny and these are The Revelations." The light came up on the stage revealing a drummer, two men with guitars and a man with a saxophone. Ronny stepped to one side, picked up a trumpet and blew three notes, each higher than the last. The band began to play. The concert had begun.

Before each act Ronny came out and spoke and everyone yelled and laughed and clapped. As the concert progressed Sam felt easier.

Ronny introduced a man who sang 'Streets of Laredo.' The cowboy wrapped around and around with white linen was a familiar picture because Sam's father sang the song on car trips. Two girls named Nona and Mary, with sad faces and black itchy sweaters, sang songs that told stories as well. There was one about Moses and the boat of reeds, and another that Sam had never heard before about a lady named Mary Hamilton who thought she was going to a wedding, but got her head cut off instead.

Suddenly Wilbur Watella appeared on stage, walking toward the microphone. Ronny stopped him, and took the microphone himself.

"And now ladies and gentlemen, the hometown boy we've all been waiting for." He turned and gestured like a ringmaster. "That warbling Watella, Wilbur."

The Revelations began to play. Wilbur drew himself up and stood at attention, then marching like a soldier he approached the microphone. Taking it from its cradle he began to sing.

--In 1814 we took a little trip, along the Colonel Jackson to the mighty Mississipp.--He sang in a high nasal voice, and as he sang he acted out the words, marching stiffly forward and backward.--We took a little bacon and we took a little beans and we fought the bloody British in the town of New Orleans.--Wilbur bunched his fist and struck at the British.--We fired our guns and the British kept a'comin'.--Wilbur held his arm out straight like a rifle.--There wasn't nigh as many as there was a while ago. We fired once more and they began to runnin'. All down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. Hup, two, three, four.--The hall rocked with sound. It leapt forward and broke racketing upon the stage. The lights became bright with it. Wilbur matched it with his own intensity, lifting his legs high and slamming them down.

Around Sam the sound grew. It was like a road grader. It was like wind in the trees, a huge, mindless, all encompassing noise. It washed over him, it lulled him, and far away he saw Wilbur, like a toy soldier, miming the song upon the stage, lifting his musket and shooting the British. His mouth was working though no one could hear him. Behind him The Revelations, finally surrendering to laughter, quit playing, and just as suddenly the sound began to break into shouts and laughter.

Wilbur's screaming voice became audible once more, and as though he sensed the wave receding he became more frantic.

--WE FIRED OUR CANNON TILL THE BARREL MELTED DOWN.--Pulling the lanyard on the cannon, Wilbur snapped the microphone cable.--SO WE GRABBED AN ALLIGATOR AND WE FOUGHT ANOTHER ROUND.--Ronny had started to walk across the stage.--WE FILLED HIS HEAD WITH CANNONBALLS.--Wilbur struck his forehead.--WE POWDERED HIS BEHIND.--He struck his thigh.--AND WHEN WE TOUCHED THE POWDER OFF THE 'GATOR LOST HIS MIND.--Bringing both hands up in an exploding motion, Wilbur hit his face with the microphone.

Sam ceased to hear, he could only stare. Wilbur stood frozen, arms high above his head, palms upward, in a gesture of explosion. He had cut his lip. His face was flushed red, his eyes squeezed shut, and his mouth open. A long string of saliva, stained red from his cut lip, dangled from his mouth. One part fell to the stage, the other bobbed easily back up towards his mouth, like a yoyo. Sam could not make out whether Wilbur was laughing or crying, and he turned in confusion to Rob. Rob was frozen in place as well. His eyes were open wide, and his hand was raised halfway to his mouth.

Sam slept late the next day. Rob had awakened him at the usual time and said that his father was going out on their neighbour's new motor boat and they could go if they wanted. Sam had said no because his parents could arrive early in the day. They had paused, looking for something to say to show it was all right. Nothing came. Finally Rob had said, "Have a nice day." Sam had replied with solemn dignity, "You too."

When he finally did get up it was a hot and colourless day,

just as though he had opened his eyes after lying in the bright sun. He sat on the front steps to wait for breakfast. The branches of the two big cottonwoods on either side of the yard met in the middle. They made a kind of picture frame. People were starting to go to the beach. A young boy appeared, half running, placing his toes down first to avoid bruising his heels on loose rocks. His elbows were out from his body, balancing. He had a kind of satin bathing suit on that was baggy at the back so that it winked in the sun. He kept stopping and looking back, as though held by invisible strings from somewhere behind him. Almost as soon as he disappeared, his mother came into the picture, shuffling in rubber sandals and sunglasses and a wide hat. She had a big straw bag. Sam knew what was in it, because his mother carried one as well. There would be big beach towels and a radio and sandwiches and a paperback book with a nurse on the cover, all smelling of sun tan oil. Today it made Sam tired.

It turned into a good day for the beach. Sam and Christopher even promised without complaint to remain in the shallow water with Elizabeth-Jane. They tried just swimming, then splashing, but it wasn't satisfactory. They even tried threatening Elizabeth-Jane with drowning, something they did only when very bored, but it didn't work. Finally they started killing June Bugs by splashing water on them. They made machine gun noises and yelled, "June Bug at six o'clock," or "June Bug at four o'clock." Normally they kept careful count of bugs they killed. Today Sam spoke up.

"They don't really die, you know. After we've splashed them they just fly away.

"No they don't." Christopher was uncertain.

"Yes they do. If you look you can see them. They've got oil on them or something. That's why they can sit on the water."

Christopher stood, one hand still raised to strike the water. Sam turned and walked back to shore. Christopher followed him.

Sam lay back and watched as the beach ball revolved back and forth in front of the white sky, turning, red, blue, and yellow. It made him ache. The graceful journey of the ball between Elizabeth-Jane and Christopher made him want to shout. As hard as either hit the ball it never jumped up, but only revolved lazily back through the air. It landed near him and he leapt up and sat on it. Elizabeth-Jane screamed that he would break it, but he only rolled off. He leapt upon it again, knees first, and pitched over in the sand. It turned into a wild shouting game that Elizabeth-Jane and Christopher joined. The ball was too big for any of them to grasp. As soon as it squeezed out from under one, another would leap upon it. Sam, sitting up and spitting sand, looked around and saw it bounce to the old man.

They had noticed him many times on the beach. He was bumpy and thin. Every day he would come down, drop his towel in the sand, walk slowly out to where the water was thigh deep, and methodically begin to splash himself. First his chest, and then, as though he was washing in front of a basin, he would splash and rub the back of his neck and under his arms. He would insert his long finger in his ear, bend slightly sideways, and vibrate his hand rapidly so that it looked just like the arrow that quivered in the bull's eye at the start of 'William Tell' on T.V. Sam had tried it, and when he hummed the proper note while doing it there was even the sound of a twanging arrow. When the old man was

finished, he would turn, walk slowly back to shore, and sit down on the sand. He never tanned, not even his shoulders. It seemed that as the summer went on and the boys got darker, he was getting more pale. He would leave after about half an hour.

Now he began to stand up with the beach ball. Sam noticed that his bathing suit was still damp where it had been creased from sitting down, and was darker than the rest of the material. He was striped. Slowly, the bright beach ball seemed to draw him up with its weightlessness. Finally he was upright, holding the ball in front of him. Then, his arms rose, and as though a breeze had caught it, the ball went up and away from him. He stood still for a moment longer, arms out and palms upward. Then, as if he realized there was no longer any reason to hold his arms aloft, he quietly lowered them. Sam began to ache again. He said it was time for supper and started walking back.

After supper Sam sat in the tree for a while. When neither Rob nor his parents showed up he started walking toward the beach. When he got there it was deserted. The sand was tired and bumpy. He sat down and began making a smooth level place in front of himself. Then, having started, he went deeper to where the sand was cool and wet and smelled of fish. He took a handful and carefully molded it into a ball. Packing it carefully, he walked in the direction of the pier, looking for something to throw it at. There was nothing. Nothing seemed worth the care he had taken in smoothing and rounding it. There were gulls waddling amongst the day's leavings, but they arched up and away before he could get close enough. By the time he got to the pier the ball was beginning to dry and crumble, but instead of throwing it away, he placed it carefully on a piling and climbed onto the pier, leaving it.

The man who had been assembling the Whirly Bug a week earlier was now dismantling it. The wind blew and caught the rusted sound of the crank the man was turning, making a sound almost like music. The spines came together one by one, catching the last brilliant sunlight. Sam turned and walked out on the pier.

Without looking he avoided the nails that had worked loose, and from his and Rob's repeated efforts to casually position Christopher in exactly the right place, he knew which boards would yawn up like a teeter totter when stepped on at one end. He always thought of the pier as being in two parts. The first part was like a big horse shoe. It went straight out, across, then back to shore. A slide had been built so that it had once been possible to slide from the pier into the water, but now the water was too shallow. Nonetheless, they had once seen a man use it. He had sat for a very long time in the shallow water, while his girlfriend asked him if he was all right. Finally, he had gotten up and limped to shore. Whenever they passed the slide they laughed about it. Sam laughed even now, alone.

The second part of the pier was like the letter L. It extended out from the first part, then went across and stopped. There were always men fishing from the second part of the pier. There was one there now, and even though he was right out at the end of the pier, Sam knew what he would look like. He would be wearing a sweater. Even on the hottest days they wore sweaters. Not sweaters that pulled over, but ones that buttoned, with pockets on either side, bulging with pipe and tobacco, or pieces of cardboard with hooks stuck in them. Almost in line with his bulging pockets would be the two pockets of skin under his eyes, as wrinkled as the skin between thumb and first finger. His eyes would be

intent, staring out over the water.

Sam sat down mid-point along the last stretch of pier. The sun was just about down. He sat looking at the hard light skipping off the water and decided to stay and watch it set. He had always wanted to watch the light go all the way out of the sky. Before, when the colours were especially beautiful, he had always gone to get someone to look at them, and by the time he returned with one of his parents or friends, the colours would have changed. Even if someone was there he could never be sure if they saw it the same way he did and so he would say, "Isn't it pretty," and the words would ruin it. But there was no one there now, and he settled down to watch, dangling his feet over the pier. Soon it would be time for the colours.

A motor boat hummed far out on the bright water. He saw the golden spray as it moved across the lake, and watched it while it turned to silver, then white. Finally it became cold and dull. He looked up and the sun had set. Staring at where it had gone down, he realized that even alone he had missed it. Now that the sun was down he did feel alone. He thought of the front room lamp being turned on, and he thought of his parents' arrival or Rob's return, but somehow it didn't seem worth the effort of getting up. Besides there was still light left in the sky, and the colours hadn't really started yet. A clang and rattle and the man was walking towards him with his bait box. He stopped beside Sam.

"Well, better luck tomorrow." He was looking down at Sam and smiling. "When the dark armies start marching, it's time to go home." Sam stared at him. "That's just what a poet called it when the sky gets dark. It's the dark armies of night marching." Sam still stared at him, and the old man tried again. "All it means is the earth turns . . . You

don't talk much, do you? Well, you'll learn those things in school." He walked on.

Sam looked straight up. The sky was deep blue, and as he craned his head and looked farther back, he could see it got deeper and deeper until finally in the east he could not be sure if it was a deep blue or black. Suddenly Sam knew and the realization was so strong he called after the man.

"They are dark armies." The man didn't hear him and kept walking.

The earth turned, and the armies overran the last light in the west. The neon lights came on all over town, singing and burning. Cars began to wheel. Someone turned the pier lights on, and so from each pole a cone of light shone down on the pier, and between each pole a cone of darkness stretched up, creating the edge of a huge and jagged saw.

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

The sun was about to rise. Samuel sat on the brow of the hill, waiting for it. Behind him, glowing faintly green in the half light, were three large figure eights which seemed to hang suspended in mid-air. In the top half of each figure eight were the words "Discovery Geophysical," and in the lower half were the words "Exploration Unit Eight." Samuel was not sleeping, but neither was he fully awake. He was, like the world around him, in a kind of twilight. Although his lips were not moving, he was talking to himself, and the voice of this interior monologue was very tired. The monologue had been continuing intermittently for many days.

--Here it comes, but not quite yet. There is still a hollowness in the air as though I were sitting in the middle of a huge bell, right at the centre. I am the clapper of the bell. If I shout there will be a ringing in the air for five miles in every direction, bouncing off the tempered steel. Are there steel bells? There must be. Could it be tempered such a dark blue? But it's getting lighter. Soon the sun will turn the steel red hot there in the east. Burning away my bell, melting it down. Not for a while, though. I am still the clapper. I still have time to shout and ring and wake the world for five miles around.

In the still morning light air a syncopated and insistent sound became audible.

--There's a sound. What is it? One, one-two. One, one-two. What is it? Oh, yes, the morning can wait. I know that sound. My mother is kneading bread, and I am ten years old. No, I am five years old sitting in front of the kitchen heat register, and my mother is kneading

bread on the small chopping table by the kitchen sink. It has uneven legs. She lifts the dough up and slaps it down. One. She leans into it twice as though washing clothes on a washboard. One-two. The chopping table is an instrument that she is playing and when she's done I can go over and look. If I blow the excess flour off, the chopping table will be a mass of white lines where the flour has stayed in the small scars. White lined pictures. A thousand white lined pictures. Stickmen, mountains, T's and W's and M's. A line of leafless poplars planted as a windbreak, branches crossing and crossing and crossing against the sky. Step back. What is the whole picture? The lines are most dense in the centre of the table, a thousand white rays exploding in every direction. Of course, it's the sun rising. And here it comes burning away my bell.

With the light of the sun, the three large trailers parked behind Samuel became obvious for the first time. The three figure eights no longer seemed suspended in mid-air, and they became signs, stenciled in green fluorescent paint, on the end of each trailer. A man peered out from the window of one of the trailers and saw Samuel seated in the grass. He stared at the silhouette of the seated figure.

--Just a crescent. A red crescent. It is a swimming red, a liquid red. Its swimmingness is that of a one-celled creature under a microscope. Or is it just the fluid in my eye? Which, my eye or the sun? Oh yes, philosophies, the day is beginning. The shadows cease to flow, and they harden on one side of the trees. Thoughts become more distinct all because of that rosy red crescent rising straight in front of me. Rosy and red? There should be better words for the sun. Big. Benign. Benevolent, Barbarous. All those B sounds. I wonder why. What is that sound? One, one-two. Yes, oh yes, I know that sound. It

is the bed on Eighth Avenue. It was unsteady the first time we used it. The legs were uneven, or the floor, and it rocked, one, one-two, one, one-two, and we knew the landlady would be shocked, one, but we were well into it, one-two, and we couldn't stop, one, and we laughed all through it, one-two, oh yes, one, the morning can wait, one-two, we laughed, one, and laughed, one-two . . .

"Blow and go, mister, blow and go. Rise and shine. You can't draw wages for sitting on your ass."

Samuel started, turned, and saw the Colonel standing on the bunkhouse steps immediately behind him.

"Good morning, Colonel."

The Colonel ignored him, finished stretching, and walked towards the kitchen trailer on the planing that had been laid down for wet weather. He had one wooden leg and although the leg would not articulate, he walked stiff and straight just the same. His boots rang on the planing, one, one-two. Samuel stood up, looked once more towards the rising sun and walked after him. --Yes, the morning has begun.

There was no interior monologue as he loaded the dynamite into the locker in the back of the truck. The bright orange, plastic covered cylinders reminded him of nothing except themselves. When he was finished he climbed into the truck, started it, and went to sleep. Thirty-five minutes later Jerome Lafarge woke him up.

They drove through the camp towards the main road, stopping only once while Jerome rolled the window down and shouted at a line truck driver. "You guys better hustle today or the drillers' holes won't be the only ones that get blown."

When he got to the main road he turned to Sam. "The Colonel is kind of agitated about you, old buddy. You spoiled his breakfast."

"Well it's good to know I can be useful in small ways at least."

"No kidding. He doesn't like the way you been acting. If you're not careful he'll give you the boot."

"That really worries me, Jerome. Not because I'd be out of a job but because of splinters in the ass. I have it on good authority he got his leg in a second hand store and it needs refinishing."

"I think you've been out here too long, buddy."

"He got it at a war surplus store. What did you say?"

"I said you've been out here too long."

"I was out here two hours too long two hours after I got here."

"Yeah, sure. We all were, but what about this business of getting up early? If you didn't fall asleep every chance you got I'd think you wanted to start early."

"It's Kowalski."

"What about him?"

"He doesn't wash his socks."

"Holy shit, I'm beginning to see the Colonel's point. Nobody out here is a lily."

"Yeah, well the point is that his socks get really stiff, and before he can put them on in the morning he has to beat them out on the head of his bunk."

"Well why don't you move? The Colonel's got two bunks free in his half compartment."

"He said he wants those free in case any new men come in."

"He said what?"

"It didn't make any sense to me either."

"Well, just tell Kowalski to wash his socks."

"I tried. He just says that he has a bath twice a week and that he's clean. If anybody's been out here too long it's Kowalski."

--Well, what do you do about Kowalski? Not only do his socks stink but there he is sitting in my mind. 'I don't know what you guys complain about. Good food, time off when it rains, a place to sleep. I've been working with the Colonel about ten years now and it's a good life.' Ten years. Marked off by a bath twice a week. 'I'm clean,' he says. Last night he walked in after his shower and I thought he had dirty underwear on, but it was his skin. Grey from the thighs down, and from the waist up a pallid, marble white. From the neck up and elbows down, tanned dark as leather. 'I'm clean.' No, Kowalski is striped. He is the barber's pole that comes from nowhere and goes to nowhere. He is the tiger in the Zoo. But I will just let him stay where he is. Thinking about him doesn't help.

They were driving on a straight gravel road that sliced evenly through the poplar bush. Where bulldozers had cleared a field, piles of brush and dirt smouldered, but gradually the open spaces in the wall of trees on either side of the road became more frequent. Inside the truck, cigarette butts popped out of the ashtray with every bounce, and empty pop bottles rattled under the seat. A number of magazines and paperbacked books, in various stages of decay, littered the dashboard and floor. Sam noticed that one of the magazines lying on the floor had fallen open at a full page picture of a naked woman.

--Cigarette butts popping out of the ashtray like a popcorn maker, and naked women posing seductively wherever they're dropped.

Lovely Lila, this month's delicious offering, fondling her right breast down there on the drive shaft. She actually exists someplace besides in the magazine, complete and whole, without the crease marks across both thighs, without the coffee stain on her left arm. Why does he read that shit? 'Hey Sam, look at this month's.' 'Sammy boy, are you familiar with Miss April in Sauve?' 'Sammy, I just got the latest issue, feast your eyes on this.' What difference does it make how he measures out his life? Why not read gaudy magazines or have a bath twice a week? Whatever my system is, it can't be any better because nothing tells me how in hell I got here, just another empty pop bottle rattling in this goddamned truck, or in a hundred other dusty cars and trucks on straight roads that go nowhere. Where was the first one? Oh yes, Saturday afternoon with my father. Driving down the gravel roads, straight and square along the section lines, past the green wheat and the dried sloughs where the baked earth buckled up so that if you lifted a piece of it you could rub it into a perfectly round disc and skip it across the remaining water in the slough. The dry powdery feeling on your fingers tempting you and repelling you at the same time the way that a split lip does. Turning left, then right, then left again, across the bridge over the irrigation ditch, making a rumbling like distant thunder, and finally into Mr. Buckram's. I remember that one afternoon best of all. When was it? There was only about three inches of water in the irrigation ditch. No, it was iced over. It was the fall. I am eight or nine. I have my first air gun so I must be at least ten. I am not supposed to shoot towards the barn or pens or the house but there are sparrows on the fence. They are grey like the fence. They are grey like the sky. And there will be pheasants by the rusted machinery next to the house. Pheasants are the

colour of rust. Perhaps down by the irrigation canal, burrs in my socks and nothing but magpies fly off. I remember the air was trapped under the ice in perfectly round white circles. If I shoot a hole in the ice it will escape. The pellets don't go through, but when I step on the ice above it, it changes shape. Step in the middle of it, it becomes a figure eight. Step back and it snaps back into a circle. But it has moved slightly. I can push it over to where the ice breaks at the edge of the canal. A figure eight. A pear. A barbell. A camel. A fat man. Thick bottle-bottom eye glasses. A thousand, thousand, thousand shapes until it is pushed to the break in the ice and must leap out and run away, white and small. Ready with the pellet gun. But it bubbles out only air, invisible. Like my memories. I open my eyes and they become invisible, but there was something else that day. Oh yes, I remember. It was the day I met Taj Majahl, Mr. Buckram's son. His real name was Russel Buckram, but that day he introduced himself as Taj Mahal. He gave me an apple to eat and two copies of Muscle Monthly to read while I waited for my father. Three weeks later I saw him on Pro-Wrestling on television. How do all these things get into my head--Kowalski, Taj Mahal--how on earth does it happen?

"Hey chief, you're talking to yourself again."

"What's that?"

"I said you're talking to yourself, and if you ask me maybe you better quit this job for a while and take a holiday or something. Wherever you are you're not here and I'd hate to see you standing on top of one of those holes talking to yourself when it went up."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm just a little tired today."

"Well, we'll probably have an hour or so before the line's set

up."

--He's right. Wherever I am, I'm not here. And why should I be? What's here? Dusty truck, dusty road, dirty windshield . . . . There's the moon, just faint in the sky. It could be a fingerprint on the windshield. The sun is burning it away. Like wax fingerprints. Dipping your fingers in the hot wax, wondering each time if it's hot enough to burn. Then waving your hands till the wax cools and pulling the wax fingerprint off. Carefully. Just so. Now hold it up to the flame. Look at the circles whirling and whirling and whirling to the centre, getting clearer as you hold it closer to the flame. Now, just a bit closer. It melts away. Like the sun is melting the moon. Do it again and another day passes. Do it again and again, this contract can't last more than another three weeks. Do it twenty-one times and then in the morning they'll open the gate and I'll be gone. They'll open the gate and I will . . .

"For chrissakes Sam, open the gate."

He stepped out and unhooked the gate. --Open the gate, shut the gate, open the gate, shut the gate, Taj Mahal, Kowalski, wax fingerprints. Who would believe it? Do I make it up?

He got back into the truck. "Hey Jerome, did you ever follow the wrestling?"

"Sure. Every Saturday on T.V."

"Do you remember Taj Mahal?"

"Do I remember Taj Mahal, the greatest monument ever erected for love of a woman? You bet I do. He was one of my favourites."

"Well, that's reassuring. I thought for a minute I had invented him."

"I would never have taken you for a wrestling fan."

"I'm not. I used to know him when I was a kid. My father knew his father. He lived on a pig farm."

"And he ate a lot of bacon. He was the biggest son of a bitch I've ever seen. What ever happened to him?"

"He quit wrestling. He's an instructor at the YMCA now. He didn't like all the acting in professional wrestling."

"Is that right? I always thought it was because of that line of his about the greatest monument ever erected for love of a woman. I thought they kicked him off or something."

"Whatever for?"

"Well, Sammy boy, that's a pretty juicy thing to say on T.V."

"Oh yeah, I see. No, what the Taj Mahal was, I mean where he got the name was from this palace in India. A king built it to show his love for a woman."

"Is that right? Well I'll be damned, here I always thought he was getting off a good one on T.V."

"Maybe he was now that I think about it."

"Don't worry about it, old buddy. Today I have a little surprise that will knock all the foolish thoughts from your head."

"What's that?"

"Be patient."

They followed the fence line and the tracks of the drillers' vehicles until they came to the place where the holes had been dug and the powder put down for the first shot. Samuel got out of the truck by the back hole and held on to the firing line until Jerome had driven to the front hole, fifty yards further on. He twisted the copper wires of

the firing line together with the blasting cap lines at the mouth of the hole. When they were connected he walked to the fence mid-way between the two holes and nailed up the permit tag. Later, when the shooting began in earnest, the sequence would be extended and speeded up. He would be riding on the truck, get off at the back hole, hook up the shot, nail on the tag, and then wait for the explosion. After the shot he would run back to the hole, push a small rubber plug down inside it, shovel dirt on top of it, and then get back on the tailgate of the truck to move to the next shot. The reason for the haste was so that Jerome could get back to the camp before most of the others and, consequently, have his choice of dessert. At first Samuel had been bitter about the speed with which Jerome liked to work, but now he only found the haste ridiculously reminiscent of a battery operated toy soldier he played with as a child. On good days he found he could even take perverse delight in finishing with the back end of the shot before Jerome had finished with the front end. The one thing that still bothered him was the fact that for speed's sake Jerome would park too close to the front hole. When the shot went up, drillers' mud and debris would rain back down upon the truck, making the windows almost useless. Walking back towards the truck Samuel noticed that Jerome had once again parked too close.

"Hey Jerome. You're parked too close. The wind is going to put ninety percent of the drillers' mud right on the front windshield."

"You're just going to sleep anyway, and I can drive blindfolded."

Sam started to reply but Jerome went on, "You haven't noticed my little surprise, have you?"

"On the contrary Jerome. You continually amaze me."

"No, I mean the one I mentioned earlier."

"No, I guess I haven't."

Jerome stepped back and began speaking in a high, ringmaster's voice. "Tonight Ladies and Gentlemen we are going to witness the greatest tag team in the history of wrestling. In this corner we have Sorrowful Sam, standing six foot two, weighing ninety-eight pounds, and fading fast, and his incredible blond, blue-eyed, five-foot-six partner--and here, Sammy boy, the crowd hushes--Jerome Lafarge, the Ten Pound Charge." Jerome turned and assuming a muscle pose, stretched the material of his old baseball jacket taut across his back. Below the familiar crest--a baseball glove with two bats crossed below it and the encircling words, "Toeville Producers' Champions'--Jerome had written the words 'Jerome Lafarge The Ten Pound Charge.'

"How do you like it? Do you get it? The sweet baby blue eyes that you have been traveling with is the one and only Ten Pound Charge. I thought I would write it down on my jacket in case a lonely farm wife happened by who needed her hole blown."

"Yeah, I get it Jerome. It makes perfect sense. It's just that I am a little tired right now. I think I'll go to sleep for a while."

"You do that, Sammy boy, Jerome's going to get a gopher or two. Check in with the recorder before you get too relaxed."

Samuel got into the truck and picked up the mike, "Recorder, this is the shooter's truck. I'm at the . . . I mean we're at the end of the line and hooked up."

"Okay shooter. We won't be set for about an hour. You guys might as well go to sleep."

--I am at the end of the line. Jerome Lafarge the Ten Pound Charge, it all just keeps on happening, but it does not make any more

sense as I go along. What in God's name am I doing here, looking through a tiny little piece of clean windshield at some fool trying to kill gophers with blasting caps. Christ, look at him. The natural man. Bright orange jacket and blasting cap wires running to the mouth of the gopher hole like two miniature mountain streams. No, like the arteries in the man-exposed pictures in the encyclopedia. If the gopher comes up there will be another chapter--gopher exposed. I wonder what he has got against them anyway. He is like a child. There is a memory to get me out of here. A memory of another cave. Rob and I at the lake, sitting in a small, cleared space under the bushes on the railway right-of-way. Smoking our first cigarettes. Lying back in the green-coloured shade and saying 'Shall we have another?' and then, just as often, crawling out to make sure the smoke didn't show. It was a cool green cave with just one ray of sunlight that penetrated to where we sat, cross sectioning the smoke and exposing all its whirls and circles. Like biting into the butterscotch ripple ice-cream cones they sold on the beach.

Jerome carefully raised a flashlight battery to touch off the blasting cap he had placed at the mouth of the gopher hole. Samuel banged the truck door open.

"Hey Jerome."

"Oh for Chrissake, what do you want? I almost had the little bastard."

"What are you doing?"

"Killing gophers."

"Jerome, they're in the same business as you."

"What's that?"

"Holes."

"Go to sleep."

--The same business as me. Just slip the powder down and wait for the bang, and three miles of microphones pick up the vibration and transmit it to a small truck three miles away and it gets printed on some paper and sent even farther away. Memory is like a hole and so is sleep, but sleep is best. You go down and come back up, but you don't have to remember. What is it about holes out of dusty places? Oh, yes, I remember. What am I, ten again? Yes. Saturday mornings at the hardware store. I first noticed it wheeling in my father's office chair. What do I see? The window, blue with dust and nicotine, giving substance to the sunlight in the room. A hot plate. A teakettle, and a pot covered with dried-on tomato soup. An old calendar with a man fishing in a mountain stream. Shredded paper dribbling everywhere from packing crates. Books, newspapers, empty glasses, and pastel-coloured invoices cover every horizontal surface. Then right in between the bulletin board and a row of keys, I saw it. A hole. Stand up and look through. I can see the hardware. There is the big spool of string and the row of guns and fishing rods, and the table where he cuts glass. Looking through the hole is like looking at a play. The actors are my father with his quiet hands, and the dusty farmers who drive in on the flat straight roads to town. What do I see? A man opens the door at the front of the hardware. Work pants, work shirt, down in the heel boots with just a touch of gold in the straw that's in the dried manure on his heels. He orders some fertilizer. His wife wanders over to the small display of dishes at the front of the store. I know them, white coffee mugs with pictures of red hatted hunters and brilliant pheasants. Plates with meandering streams and trees that have so many leaves that the artist has not painted them

one by one but with broad strokes of the brush. Teacups with deep red roses that have no thorns. The hole he cut in the wall was his own private window on the world. He could not have seen much better things than what I can see right now. As the chain stores got bigger and their prices went lower and the customers became fewer he must have been as tired as I am. I wonder what he did about it. Oh yes, I remember. Look away from the hole in the wall and look down into the right hand cupboard in his desk. That is where he started looking when it all went wrong for him. It is dim and shadowed in his drawer and I can see them. Row upon row, shining shoulder to shoulder back into the shadows are dozens of empty wine bottles. I remember that the way they were so perfect and uniform that they seemed to represent a great wealth. At five cents a bottle, how many were there? In rows of four to a row. And how many rows . . .

Samuel went to sleep counting bottles.

When Samuel awoke, Jerome was sitting in the cab with him, reading.

"Hi Buddy. I thought you were going to sleep through the good part."

"Jerome, if you are planning on reading to me forget it. I am not really interested in whatever it is."

"Just a couple of paragraphs, Sammy boy. It will wake you up and it's too good to keep to myself. Just listen to this . . . 'Marion gave him a cool, level, grey-eyed gaze and reached behind her back to unfasten her bra, straining the flimsy material that cupped her breasts until it seemed it would snap asunder. Then, one hand holding the fabric

in place, she slipped the straps from her tanned shoulders. In the dim light her breasts, marble white, stood out in bold relief on her tanned torso. Seth said evenly, "If Michelangelo had such marble to work with . . ." A half smile played at the corners of his mouth and, raising his hand he lightly brushed her deep red, upright nipples with the backs of his fingers, saying, "But the stone is flawed." She stepped back towards the bed and shuddering involuntarily said . . .'"

"Shooter, are you ready? This is the recorder."

Jerome flipped the book up on the dashboard and picked up the mike.

"All set, recorder."

"All quiet on the line."

Jerome held the switch down and the high pitched sound that preceded the shot came over the line.

--It cuts, dentist drill, metal on metal screaming.

The sound stopped. They felt the slight bump. Samuel put on his safety helmet and took hold of the door handle.

"Here we go, Sammy boy. Blow the hole then fill it up."

Samuel ran to the back hole and then followed the dark stain of drilling mud out to where the rubber plug was. The plugs were always tied to the blasting cap wires and they went up with the shot, flying with the wet debris in the direction the wind was blowing. He got the plug, took it back to the hole, shoved it down inside, and shoveled dirt onto it. He ran back to the truck and climbed up on the tailgate. He set his feet apart for balance, took a firm hold on the firing line, and then, almost as if savouring the last moment, he paused. Taking a deep breath, he yelled to Jerome to drive. Tires spinning, the truck moved up

the line. As if to accommodate the sudden rush of the wind past his ears, the interior monologue suddenly grew louder.

--Oh yes. Now the morning truly has begun, and the twin columns of dirt and mud snapping erect behind me like giant exclamation points. The dust rises. We are like rocks skipped across the earth, brown dirt rising where we touch the surface. Watch the fence line for the survey tape fluttering through the dust. Watch for it. Watch for it. And there it is, and Jerome, on cue, slows down and stops.

The monologue was no longer interior. As though he were reading instructions to himself, Samuel talked out loud as he got off the truck to hook up the hole.

"The truck goes on. Now the firing line. Twist the copper wire. Twist one. Twist the other. Now run to the fence and nail up the permit tag. Who gave permission? Who said it's all right you can . . . There's the sound. An off-key bugle call, high and shrill. Now wait for it. Wait for it. It will just be a soft bump, like dropping a book in school, waiting with a wince for the bang, but it lands perfectly flat with just the sound of rushing air. There it is, a nudge to the tailbone, and listen for it rushing up the fifty feet of earth and then into the open air with a sound like the hoofbeats of Hollywood cavalry coming over the rise. Now the rocks and pebbles raining down. There is no time for old movies. Run across the field looking for the little rubber plug. Follow the stain of the drillers' mud lying dark on the ground like a frozen shadow. Now put the plug down and fill the hole and run back to the truck across the brown hills. Stand up on the back. It's like a chariot."

"Okay Jerome, drive." The force with which he yelled to Jerome

startled and pleased him. He began laughing, and, although unaware of it, he began to shout.

"Wheels turn. Gears change. The dust rises and the sun is obscured but the shadows stay behind me frozen on the field. We are independent of the sun. There will be no more revolving."

As the truck moved up the line, the shouting continued sporadically, becoming more and more irrational. At times, a phrase, attractive for one reason or another, would be shouted over and over again, gradually losing whatever context it had first had.

In the cab of the truck, Jerome was intent on driving, and he did not hear the shouting. The truck skirted the edge of a slough, skidded, and, tires spinning, dug itself in. Jerome, hoping to avoid getting stuck, kept his foot on the accelerator. When he finally realized that they were irrevocably trapped in the mud, he put the truck in neutral and began rolling the window down to tell Samuel to try pushing. The sound he heard as he rolled the window down had originally been the phrase 'Drive on and let me be,' but the shouted repetition had turned the 'let me be' into a long drawn-out scream. He craned his head back out the window and looked back.

"Oh Jesus." He pulled his head back into the truck and picked up the mike.

"Recorder, this is the shooter. I think we've got some trouble here."

"What's the problem, shooter?"

"There's something wrong with Sam."

"Hello recorder, this is the line truck driver. Did you say there's something wrong with the cable?"

"No, there's something wrong with the shooter's helper."

"This is the base camp. The Colonel speaking. Has there been an accident? Recorder, what's going on?"

"Hello base camp. This is the line truck. I think there's some trouble with the cable."

"Colonel, this is the recorder. There's no trouble with the cable. Somebody said there's been an accident."

"Jesus Christ. This is the goddamned shooter. There has been no accident. There's something wrong with my goddamned helper."

"This is the Colonel. Shooter, what's that shouting in the background? I'm trying to find out what's going on here. What in God's name is that screaming? A radio is a useful instrument for communication and you men treat it like a toy. Now, I want everybody to shut up and start to communicate."

PROLOGUE

Prologues are not common in modern times, or at least they are not as common as they once were. I am attracted to the convention of the prologue simply because it is in my nature to start at the beginning, work through the middle, and arrive at the end. Such a logical progress is, in my opinion, admirable, and a glance at any of the more respected pieces of literature written in this century might convince many people that my logical approach is one that deserves more attention. But I am not a literary critic. I am simply a man who is sitting in front of his typewriter on an early spring/late winter day writing a prologue. A prologue is a kind of literary handshake between author and reader, a hint of things to come, and a deep breath before the plunge. And so I will begin at the beginning.

My name is Jonathan W. Corning. The W stands for William, Warrington, Wedgely, Wallace, or anything else that begins with a W and seems to fit the occasion. I am a great believer in names, or, for that matter, in titles, labels or anything else that comes under the general category of Names. I have arrived at a point in my career which, I suppose, must afford me some satisfaction. I have a staff of four working under me and a respectable and, at times, even interesting job. An exact description of my employment would, of course, be inappropriate at a first meeting, and so it has no place here in my prologue. It is sufficient to say that my staff and I are in the process of moving from our old location to a new building. The new quarters will not be ready for some time but already, in my absence, my staff will be beginning to prepare for the move. The records, catalogues, and so forth require a

good deal of sorting out, and as the move offers an opportunity for house cleaning, much of the material will be burned. With four months leave of absence and nearly three months of accumulated holiday, I have before me a clear stretch of time in which to write the stories I have always promised myself I would write.

Perhaps the only popular literary belief to which I subscribe is that a writer's material should be to a considerable extent autobiographical, and I have chosen to write about some of the experiences I had as a young man. The time is distant enough so that I can be objective, and memorable enough so that I can be accurate. I also believe that the brief time when a young man has a certain maturity but is not yet dulled by the cares of the world is a time which holds universal appeal.

My literary handshake is complete, and my hint of things to come has been given. All that remains for me to do is to take my deep breath. Tomorrow I will begin writing the first of my stories, and I will not finish until I have finished my prologue. My paper is stacked beside me on the shelf, and the days lie before me.

THE STUDENT PRINCE

When I was three years old my parents bought an RCA Victor Radio-Hi-Fi Deluxe. The cabinet was all of the darkest mahogany except at the bottom where the speakers were housed behind a golden cloth that was woven with just enough black threads to make the gold shine brighter by contrast; it was an aristocratic piece of furniture and entirely deserved the two hyphens in its name. Unfortunately it was me who changed that name forever. Family myth tells of how my mother came into the front room one day and discovered me pushing in the shiny woven material that encased the speakers. After pulling me away she asked what possible reason I could have for committing such a sacrilege. In three-year-old fashion I replied that I was attempting to find out where the music came from. The RCA Victor Radio-Hi-Fi Deluxe remained ever afterward with its lower portion pushed in like an old screen door; my sister titled it Old Baggy Face, and the name stayed with it.

As anecdotes go, the preceding approaches the sentimental, but I am not a sentimental person. I mention the incident only because the record that was playing when I committed my childhood misdemeanor was the operetta The Student Prince, from which I have obviously borrowed the title for this story. I still have the very same record, and because it is the original issue with Mario Lanza, it could possibly be a collector's item by now. Although the recording is scratched and fuzzy, I still prefer it to any re-recording I have heard. Because I have borrowed the title, a few words about the operetta are in order.

The Student Prince, played by Mario Lanza, is in Heidelberg, incognito, getting his education. While there he falls in love with

Cathy, the barmaid. Difficulties are inevitable, and not the least of them is the vast difference in title between Prince and Barmaid. Love, however, conquers all, and they seem well on the way to the typical happy-ever-after ending of an operetta. Unfortunately the Prince's father dies, and he must return to rule his country, leaving behind his true love and creating, when I stop to think about it, one of the few sad endings to be found in the genre.

Of course a brief sketch of the plot cannot convey the rich texture of the operetta, and so before the proper beginning of this story, I should like to include a few lines from the record cover. I would prefer to give them in their entirety, but I realize I am overly fond of such things as liner notes and prone to quoting them at too great a length. The concluding paragraph, however, adequately suggests the beautiful aura I have associated with the operetta ever since those days in front of the golden-sheathed, albeit baggy-faced, RCA Victor Radio-Hi-Fi Deluxe. I quote:

> Here in a land of make believe and melodic escape, each listener, regardless of age or personal philosophy, can visualize, if only for a few fleeting moments, the golden world of Heidelberg. Today, in a world filled to the brim with the jazz of these hectic times, The Student Prince's lovely melodies emerge with new truth and beauty, charm and romance. The story may be pure hokum, but it is hokum that each of us believes in his heart to be true. We may not believe in fairy tales, but in the midst of such wonderful, transcending music, how can we be sure they are not true after all. The virtues of this score have been resoundingly re-affirmed in the acceptance by the American Public of the Big Screen re-make, the soundtrack of which you are holding in your hands. [I should interject here to note for those who have seen the movie that while it was Mario Lanza's voice you heard, it was not Mario Lanza you saw. For some reason he did not appear, and the actor who played the Prince merely mouthed the songs.] Now sit back in your favourite chair, close your eyes, and enter the beautiful, timeless world of Heidelberg.

And so we may begin. It was spring; they took the hockey rink boards down, and so the sound of a puck slapped against wood by some athletic young man was replaced by the almost identical sound of a hammer hitting wood as arthritic Mr. Cuthbert repaired the ravages of frost on his wooden garden walk. That Christmas I had passed my college early-entrance exams, and so I was not obliged to take my final spring term of high school. In that briefest of interludes between the slush of late winter and the dust of summer, I took up the study of the violin.

Friday morning I would take the bus across town, passing streetcleaning crews, city gardeners, and people who, for one reason or another, were like myself, unemployed and enjoying the first warm days of the year. Arriving at the Eldorado Apartments, I would walk up around the back, up three flights of stairs, past two kitchen windows and two lines of washing, and knock upon the door of number 17. Number 17 was the home and studio of Leon Zubov. He taught the violin. I was his student.

I would knock upon the door three times, step back, and wait for the Maestro to appear. Not only would he appear, but he would step completely outside into the sunlight (and believe it or not, the sun was always shining). Bowing slightly he would say "Good Morning, Mr. Corning." Then, as if he took great delight in the little poem he had made, he would start to twinkle. Literally. The sun would glint off of his brown, bald head, his spectacles, and his one gold tooth. For my part, I felt compelled to smile hugely, bow more than slightly in return, and reply formally "Good Morning, Mister Zubov," always stifling the desire to call him Maestro.

We would stand for a few minutes longer, talking about the

weather. Hands behind his back, he would peer judiciously around for a situation worty of philosophical enquiry, and then, for example, looking at the lines of laundry, he would compare the desirability of dry clothes with the desirability of rain for the perpetually wilted geraniums in the window box on the fire escape opposite to where we stood. I would no sooner become interested in these discourses and suspenseful about their outcome, then he would straighten up, turn, and look directly at me. I would prepare myself for a succinct and pithy resolution to the problem and he would say, almost with surprise in his voice, "Well, you have come for a violin lesson. Follow me."

I remember that during my first lesson I was slightly confused by the silence that descended upon Zubov after we stepped into the hall and walked down to his studio. Thinking that I had not been holding up my end of the conversation, I cast about for the correct thing to say to a violin teacher. All I could manage was to ask if there was anything in particular I could do to care for my violin. He told me to pack it in linen.

During the next lesson I was equally tongue-tied, and I resorted to asking him if the cloth I had was adequate. He put down the sheef of music he had been holding, closed the lid of his piano bench carefully, and walked across the room. Picking up the cloth, he examined it intently and pronounced it to be a fine piece of cloth with a fine weave. I was so taken aback at the serious way in which he treated what I had meant as casual conversation that I blurted out, "Yes, the Irish make fine linen." I had no idea if it was Irish or not, but it sounded like the right thing to say. He immediately showed renewed interest in the cloth, holding it up to the light and pulling it slowly through one

hand. It occurred to me that he might be some sort of linen enthusiast in his spare time, and I prepared myself to qualify the claim that it was Irish. He turned to me and said "It is not green. Is it?" and started to twinkle. Every lesson thereafter, if the silence became too oppressive, he would cross the room and inquire after my Irish linen. Holding it up to the light he would remark "It is not worn out yet. Is it?"

With the preludial part of the violin lesson over, there would not even be a suggestion of improvisation. The instrument would be tuned and the exercises would be unfolded on the music stand. Almost with the intonation of ritual the question, "And did you study this?" would be put forward, followed by the pleased smile when I told him that I had. The sun shone in the window. Pasternak and Tolstoy, flanked by thinner, less well-known authors, sat in benign judgement on the bookshelf; from the wall, autographed portraits of fellow violinists looked down approvingly upon me. Each musician had included his violin in his portrait. The instrument would be held up to one cheek if it was a front view, and if it was a profile, they would gaze at the violin myopically, nose almost touching the strings, as if looking for the lost chord in the soundbox or a previously unnoticed "Made by Stradivarius." But I, too, was an artist and gladly forgave them their eccentricity. I still remember Zubov fondly, and his memory has no bad aspects except, perhaps, that he did not take me as seriously as I did. I have always felt that this lack of seriousness had something to do with my size; I am six foot two, and Zubov was, at the most, five foot three in his shoes. I remember that the first day I met him he looked up at me and said "Such a big fellow, and you wish to study the violin?" As it turned out, his concern with my size was not due to any pettiness on his part, but was the result of his

usual policy of taking only young children as students. He preferred his proteges to be completely naive about the world of music, and he accepted me only after being assured that I had never tried to learn an instrument before.

Our difference in size did, however, have a direct and observable effect, and I discovered it early one Friday morning. His studio had a big picture window with a southern exposure, and our shadows were thrown on the wall. Zubov always circled around me during a lesson, speaking and gesturing; his shadow was making a small jerky correction at the end of each gesture. He was so used to three foot high people that he had three foot high gestures, and with me he was forced to continually revise them upwards. I also saw that out of respect for Zubov I was trying hard to oblige him by shrinking. And so it went, with me trying to cut my gestures in half and Zubov trying to double his. The studio wall became one of those old silent movies that are taken at thirty frames to the minute. But humorous or not, it worked. His incantations had their effect. 'Flow, don't jump, flow,' and the scales would rise and fall each time more and more certain. The morning sunlight would shine brighter and brighter until the diamond dust of rosin beneath the bridge of the violin shone like frost. 'Keep the bow straight, Cup your hand, Keep your elbow down, flow,' and gradually the incantation would give way to pantomime, more sensed than seen. Suddenly the piano would be playing with the violin and the scales would be turning to music with flourishes at the end. I am sorry that I never looked at the shadows then, but I suspect they achieved a certain grace. Perhaps they even began to dance. And that is how each lesson went. Each Friday the sound became fuller, and each Friday the spring became more rich and clear.

The days grew longer, and rain washed the street and filled the trees with leaves. Some lines from a song in The Student Prince come to mind:

When it's summertime in Heidelberg
There's beauty everywhere
All the trees are dressed in their Sunday best
And the brass band plays in the square
Every day is like a holiday
Strolling underneath the sun
All the frauleins wear flowers in their hair
With a smile to spare for everyone.

I know that does not look quite right in print, but perhaps behind the words you can imagine the wistful charm of the music. But I am getting ahead of myself. One cannot leap from Springtime with Zubov to Summertime in Heidelberg so easily.

On Friday, at exactly twelve o'clock, I would find myself outside the Eldorado Apartments. I cannot remember how Zubov would end the lessons, but sometimes it seemed I had imagined the previous hour and had yet to knock upon his door. At any rate, I would be standing in the sunshine with the rest of the day free. Perhaps it was Zubov, or that spring, or simply the fact that I had been out of school only a short time, but those Fridays were special. Carrying a violin always got the extra attention that a young man growing his first moustache appreciates, and I wore a long, black overcoat, even on the warmest days, to achieve the proper emaciated look of a student who lived only for his art. I would board the bus, place my violin in a visible location, fold my hands in a way that increased the look of sensitivity about them, and, finally, assume an intense and abstracted expression. Looking back on it now I suspect that I rarely impressed the audience that I had to work with.

I remember the regulars on that bus trip very clearly. As well

as being my audience and unwitting participants in my Friday, they were, for the most part, patrons of the Riverside Goldenage Home and Recreation Centre, and they had their minds on the upcoming Friday festivities. Every stop on the way downtown one or two more would totter on until there was a whole busload. About five blocks before their stop a strange undercurrent of sound, like wind chattering dry leaves, would become audible. I came to recognize that sound as the signal of the old people's departure; all the ancient shopping bags and dry joints whispered together, preparing for the struggle. The sound in the bus would become symphonic in magnitude as all who were sufficiently able-bodied began to reach for the pull cord. The bell would ring four or five times in quick succession, the bus, which was stopping anyway, would stop, and all the old people would get up and charge in slow motion for the exit. As slow as their progress was, it was not unimpeded. Immediately across the street from the Riverside Goldenage Home and Recreation Centre was the Better Life Insurance Building. It was the policy of many of the offices in that building to close down Friday afternoons, and as a consequence the stop where the old people disembarked was also the embarkation point for a horde of secretaries. The result was a kind of changing of the guard. Invariably, with all of the excitement, four or five old people would attempt to get off at the front of the bus. Just as invariably, some of the secretaries would try to get on at the same time. A ritual battle would take place between ancient shopping bags and patent leather purses, and it was not as one-sided as one might think. The old people used their excessive feebleness to good advantage, giving the impression that unless they were granted unmolested and immediate passage they would crumble to dust right there on the bus. The secretaries, on the other

hand, counter-attacked with many audible comments to the effect that even little children are knowledgeable enough to get off at the back of the bus. For my part, I sat still and with my intense expression intact. I felt I was viewing the Parade of Life, and a smile would have been highly inappropriate. The exact significance of my designation, Parade of Life, escapes me now, but at the time, I possessed an artist's perception. On those special Fridays, and in the bright, spring sunshine, all of it seemed to make sense.

Friday afternoon I would always walk back down towards the centre of the town. Being what you could call a Renaissance Man, I was not content to be a musician in the morning and a mere Suburban Adolescent in the afternoon. Accordingly, after putting my violin away, I would become a young writer. Donning my tweed jacket with the frayed elbows (for some reason I felt frayed elbows to be a major proof of a young writer), I would go forth.

The journey through the suburb where I lived was as dry as the dust that was forever blowing off the new construction. Moving as quickly as an elegaic, musing, and artistic pace would allow, I ignored the pastel houses which had been set down behind the gold-flecked, newly-seeded lawns which, in turn, had been set down behind the flacid arcs of string fences, the purpose of which I cannot fathom to this day, unless it is to anchor the whole ephemeral business to the ground. Lamp post alternated with stick-like, newly-planted sapling in a frighteningly regular fashion, but I was not afraid. I was on my way to my spiritual home, and when all that remained to be seen of the Pacific Plaza Shopping Centre, the last out-post of the suburbs, was the giant loop of the P in

Pacific, I knew I was safe. Like some timid Odysseus, I would mutter to myself, "Jonathan W. Corning bids you adieu."

Standing beside a statue entitled "The First Family," a representational piece of work, or so I would assume, I was at the mid-point of my journey. For reasons I do not understand today I liked this statue and felt it to be an appropriate resting place. "The First Family" consisted of a man, woman, baby, and horse who were all, with the exception of the baby, gazing intently at a survey stake. For those uninitiated in Canadian history, a survey stake was some sort of stick placed in the ground which, when consulted, would inform pioneers whether or not they had found the homestead they had signed up for back at the last civilization. Judging from the intense expression of the First Family it was a significant moment, and perhaps that is what attracted me to the statue, for below me, in the river valley, was the older part of the city and the world where I belonged. All that remained for me to do was go down the hill, through Memorial Park, and I was there. The string fences were gone, replaced by huge, untrimmed hedges, birdnesting with bottle caps, candy wrappers, and possibly even the faded fragments of love letters. Trees no longer disappeared like nuts into bolts, but spread out at the bottom like huge bird claws. The sun, instead of beating down, filtered through the leaves; the dust was out of the air. Taking two or three deep breaths, I would once again become the real Jonathan W. Corning: Young Writer, Student of the Violin, and in the midst of spring.

That spring I wrote mostly poetry. "Shall we search in darkened corners? / Drinking deep the despairing cup?" are two rather typical lines that come to mind. I also remember that often bloodless

corpses would arise in the middle of the poem and give the world an accusing stare. It was all rather deadening stuff but for one bright note. I wrote an extremely artful short story. Although I probably liked the story for the wrong reasons, the fact remains that it has stood the test of time. I should like to take the opportunity to briefly summarize it here.

The hero of the story is a young painter named James. There are two other characters, James' true love, Katherine, whom he met while buying paint, and Leroy, who has a lisp and takes care of James' rooming house. As the story opens, we discover that James is slowly starving to death for his art. By his brooding sensitivity and his almost neurotic dedication to his work he has alienated Katherine, who finally leaves town, and Leroy, who leaves as well, but not before writing James a note explaining that he can no longer watch a young man ruin his life over something as silly as painting. I remember Leroy's note vividly because James, who by this time is extremely thin, laughs hysterically over the fact that Leroy does not write with a lisp. James is now completely alone as the days pass and engaged in his masterwork, a series of water-colours depicting what he sees through his basement window. A strange thing begins to happen to him. He begins to believe that the sound of the dripping faucet in the apartment upstairs is the beating of his own heart. He becomes so convinced about the location of the sound that he cannot leave his room, even to buy paint, because when he attempts to do so he can no longer hear his heartbeat. The climax comes when two plumbers arrive upstairs to fix the faucet. The leak is stopped and James, convinced his heart has quit beating, begins to breathe his last. With one last spasmodic effort he reaches his easel and, embracing it,

falls to the floor. Dead. Of a heart attack. Upstairs one of the plumbers, his toil-scarred hands replacing his tools in his tool box, turns to his comrade and says "Well, I guess that fixes that drip."

That spring there were other stories and poems too numerous to mention. What I lacked in quality I made up for in quantity. The reason for the out-pouring was simple. Not only was I Jonathan W. Corning, Student of the Violin, Young Writer, and in the midst of spring, but I was also in love. Yes, I was definitely in love. It was unrequited love and unspoken love, but perhaps that is the best kind.

The lady worked at the Woolworth's immediately across from the Sunnyside Library. The Sunnyside Library was the goal of my afternoon rambles because I believed that my muse favoured its ivied walls. I also happened to believe that I did my best writing on a brand of stationery known as Penman's Parchment. These various details merged into a significant whole one Friday afternoon. I discovered myself in the Sunnyside Library without any Penman's Parchment. I walked across the street to the Woolworth's to renew my supply, and it was then that I met her. It was love at first sight. Inspired, I wrote copiously in the days that followed and consequently needed more Penman's Parchment. With the purchase of fresh supplies I became even more inspired and wrote even more copiously, needing even more Penman's Parchment and so forth. I was as close as I will ever come to that ageless dream of mankind, self-sustaining, perpetual motion. But I should not be so casual about what was probably my first love.

Having never really spoken to her except in the guise of a business transaction, all of our meetings were much the same, but it is important to remember that our exchanges were not so much commercial as

ceremonial. I would cross the street and enter into all the worlds of Woolworth's. There was Man's World, Woman's World, Toy World, and even a collection of business machines known as Calculator World. I would make a random journey through these various worlds toward the back of the store, and there, wedged between World of Lace (a collection of women's undergarments I referred to privately as Underworld) and Sports World, was the counter where all the jetsam from the other worlds collected. There, presiding over various porcelain animals that served as paper-weights, napkin holders and calorie counters, surveying with beautiful blue eyes giant butterflies, miniature Eiffel Towers and, of course, the Penman's Parchment, was my true love. "Penman's Parchment please," I would say. "One package, please" I would add, and then watch the Penman's Parchment disappear into the bag. The carillon of the cash register would play and the bag would be handed across to me over all the porcelain animals, the calorie counters, the vegetable choppers, the desk calendars, the tiny five-year diaries, the tray of ten cent rings, the plaques with Home Sweet Home, the sequined pictures of Jesus, the novelty ashtrays, the plastic ice cubes that contained plastic flies, the pencil sharpeners, the coin banks, the plastic flowers, the music boxes, and, taking the bag, our hands would touch. I would look up. She would smile. What a smile it was. I can remember it even now. To the casual observer I would then walk out of the store carrying my purchase, but what really happened in that split second was far, far different. From the loud-speakers a bounding waltz would begin to play. It was, as I recall, the "Drinking Song" from The Student Prince, and we would be dancing up and down the aisles. In our wake, Man's World and Woman's World would be coming together. Like two maiden aunts watching their respective niece and

nephew lead off the first ball of the new season, Toy World and Calculator World would reconcile their differences and applaud their similarities. All of the clerks in the store would put down their wares, come out from behind their counters, take up steins of beer, and begin to sing the chorus:

> Here's a hope that those bright eyes will shine
> Longingly, lovingly soon into mine.
> May those lips that are red and sweet
> Tonight with joy my own lips meet.
> Drink Drink Drink
> Let every true lover salute his sweet heart.

Once again I have no note that the print does not do justice to the song. At any rate, the song would always end, and I would find myself outside of the Woolworth's with my muse whispering in my ear. It goes without saying that spring could not last forever either. As it turned out, my last lesson with Zubov put a proper ending to the season.

Sometimes, when I was practicing the violin at home, a strange thing would start to happen. It would be the same violin and the same exercises, but the sound would be twice as good. I do not know where it came from, but I always knew when it was going to happen. Picking up the violin, my hands would be alive as if they had an intelligence of their own, and the violin did not seem so much an instrument as it seemed a logical extension of my arms. It had never happened with Zubov, and then, during my last lesson, it did.

The scales rose like birds. The bowing exercises were clear and certain. My arm was strong and sure. I began on the lesson he had given me a week earlier and suddenly the separate notes became music. Zubov started to sing. He had an unbelievably resonating baritone voice, and he was singing a counter melody in Russian. I was no longer

manipulating an instrument; I had become the instrument myself. The sound was like my own breathing, and Zubov's singing filled the room as naturally as sunlight. I felt intoxicated when we had finished and Zubov must have too, for instead of discovering myself outside his door, I found he was talking to me. He said he had played the violin for fifty years and every day he had learned something new. He told me I should never limit myself, and that the song he had been singing was about a Russian peasant on the way to see his sweetheart. Each verse was about the peasant's work and where it was. It was in his heart when he thought of his sweetheart, and in his soul when he passed the church, and in the soil when he ploughed it. Zubov talked as if he knew, and I didn't at the time, that I wouldn't be coming back after the summer.

So, that was my time in Heidelberg. 'Gaudeamus igitur iuvenes dum sumus'--Let us rejoice then while we are young. That is a line from an old Roman song that was used in The Student Prince. The song goes on to note that soon we will be dead and buried and food for worms. Nothing that drastic happened to me. On the other hand I wasn't able, like the Prince, to sing "I'll Walk with God" and return home to rule a country. Instead I took a job selling encyclopedias. Encyclopedia Salesman is a long way from Student Prince, but I was determined to treat my employment as a stage in my education.

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I must admit that at the time I took the job I was not aware of the singular appeal of that best of all reference books, the encyclopedia. Until that spring, my only previous experience with them had been

unfortunate. Shortly after I learned to write legibly, my sister, swept away by the gala social world of junior high school, persuaded me to save her some time in her studies. She asked me to write her class report and, bringing home the appropriate volume of the encyclopedia, she told me to copy out the entry on dinosaurs word for word. Reading the report to the class the next day, my sister, always a rather literal-minded individual, inadvertently read out the cross references at the end, see fossil, reptile, extinction, and so forth. That night she accused me of wilful stupidity. Not being well-versed in the arts of rhetoric, I defended myself by retreating down the hall toward my room, repeating at the top of my voice, "You said word for word, word for word, word for word." Even now, if anyone questions me about what the initial in my name stands for, she is likely to say my name is Jonathan word-for-word Corning and recount the whole ridiculous story.

Such inauspicious beginnings with the encyclopedia have been entirely rectified, however, and I now have two sets, the Britannica and the World, both of which I keep up to date. Confronted with any of the versions of that great philosophical maxim "Know Thyself," I take a great deal of comfort knowing that if I do not know something myself, at least I know where to look for it. At the time I took the job, however, philosophical dictums were the farthest thing from my mind; I needed money for university in the fall.

The ad in the paper read "High Paying Jobs. Commission or Salary. Apply Now" followed by an address and an excessive number of exclamation points. I went downtown to the address and waited in front of the elevator for perhaps five minutes until I discovered a rather

cryptic message, Out of Order Please / Use Stairs, on the floor. That the message was written in red ink upon a slightly soiled, blue paper napkin did not impune its authority, and, in fact, its appearance seemed appropriate to the premises. I went up five flights of stairs and entered an office containing almost no furniture and two men. I was ushered into an adjoining room that contained three rows of grey metal fold-down chairs, a blackboard, and a number of what I correctly assumed were fellow applicants. I remember standing beside the window trying to convince myself that all of it would, sooner or later, be grist for the artist's mill. Evidently I was successful in my arguments, because following a short talk centering around the golden opportunities that awaited us if we would only step forward and take them, I discovered myself signing, so to speak, on the dotted line.

The two men who conducted the session were Big Dan and the Boss. Big Dan (it was his wish that we all call him Big Dan) did all of the talking, managing quite cleverly to make his reference to golden opportunity sound like riches, happiness, and fame simultaneously. The Boss, whose name I never did learn, simply looked on, giving the best impression of anonymity I have yet witnessed. We were entered immediately upon five days of unpaid instruction that was to begin with something Big Dan verbally capitalized as Sales Theory, and end with something he called Field Experience.

The first four days involved Sales Theory, the memorization of various rituals such as the sales talk, the signing of the contract, the display of the book, and so forth. However, it seems to me now that we spent most of our time on the door-opener, the magic set of words and gestures whereby a salesman gains admittance to the house. According to

Big Dan, our door-opener had been compiled by a battery of psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists at Great Expense to the company, and it was never to be deviated from when out selling. I was a natural for the door-opener; it appealed to the actor in me.

1. Ring or knock and wait for someone to appear behind their screen door.
2. "Good afternoon. My name is Jonathan W. Corning." Extend your hand to be shaken and the other person should open the door to do so. (You could, of course, use Good Morning or Good Evening as the situation demanded, but there was one fellow there, with a markedly less analytical mind than average, who probably always said Good afternoon no matter what the time of day.)
3. "I am doing a survey of young families in this area." Point down the block and look intently in the same direction. This action should draw the person outside on to the step to see what you are pointing at.
4. "It's a matter of a few questions." Look directly into their eyes, giving an impression of sincerity and honesty.
5. "Might I step inside?" Point emphatically and with fully extended arm at the feet. They should step back to see what you are pointing at.
6. Walk quickly by into the house.

We practised the door-opener continually. We did it forwards and backwards. We had to perform it correctly to get into the office or out of the office. We tried to confuse each other by making faces. We mimed it, satirized it, burlesqued it, and it comes to me now why I remember it above all else; near the end of the four days of sales theory a very strange thing began to happen. I started to believe that if I

could perform the door-opener with perfection, just once, then the door to golden opportunities would indeed open, and I would find myself sitting on some park bench that was ancient and frayed with initials, rather than on the irritating smoothness of a grey metal, fold-down chair.

Friday finally did arrive, and the door opened at last. As I did not fancy the role of understudy, I had not been looking forward to the day of field experience with Big Dan. I was sure of my ability as an encyclopedia salesman and so at first I was not very attentive, but as the day wore on, I began to observe Big Dan more closely. I was, after all, a Young Writer, and so even Big Dan deserved a closer examination.

Actually he looked about the same from close up as he did from far away, that is to say, big. He was six foot two and two hundred and forty-five pounds, he told me so himself, more than once. In fact, you might say that size was the big thing in Big Dan's life. Accordingly, I humored him all day with references to his bulk. He would stop before a house, and an eternal optimist, he would say, "Well, this looks like the one," and I would hold forth with some little poem like "If anyone can, Big Dan is the Man," and he would chortle all the way up the walk. I felt a little like the owner of a dancing bear.

The day passed quickly enough, but before I leave Big Dan I should note that he had one other dimension, a secret garden, as it were: he was extraordinarily adept at inventing metaphors for breasts. I must admit that at first he offended my sensibilities, but my fondness for any kind of name or title soon prevailed, and by the end of the day I was totally intrigued. Big Dan realized he had an appreciative audience, and driving back to the office, he treated me to a tour de force of what can only be considered a highly specialized art form. I cannot reproduce the

cadence and rhythms of his speech as we passed various women on the street, but I can recall his categories. As far as I could ascertain there were, in ascending order, tennis balls, handfuls, hangers, full rounds, bazoombas, and tomato juice cans (I assume that he meant the forty-eight ounce variety).

He was just getting warmed up when his performance was cut short. A pick-up truck drove by, loaded to the brim with someone's household belongings, and right on top were two of the most gauche pink lampshades I have ever seen. Without thinking I said "Look at those lamp shades," and Big Dan, wrenching his head from side to side in an arc of well over one hundred and eighty degrees, drove through a red light. Fortunately no one was hurt. Unfortunately a police car was on hand, and so for the remainder of the trip Big Dan was stony and silent. My education complete, I was truly ready to begin. As I settled back into the car seat, the sun shone through the windshield and all the golden doors of opportunity beckoned to be, burnished and shining, from the far side of the intervening weekend.

I spent Saturday and Sunday polishing up my act and thinking how it would look in my biography: "As a young man, Corning was often forced to take the menial jobs which he later transmitted, as lead to gold, into the rich chronicles of life that he left the world." By Monday morning I even had an encyclopedia salesman outfit, an exceedingly slack-shoudered, shiny-posteriored suit I had inherited from my father which I felt suited the role of salesman perfectly. I placed a daisy in my buttonhole and assembled downtown with my fellow salesmen. We were driven out to the Grand Manor Estates, a new suburb on the south end of

town. Big Dan told me where he would pick me up and wished me bon voyage. I knew my door-opener. Furthermore, I had every confidence in my ability to charm the enlightenment of the encyclopedia into at least every third house. I was, after all, Jonathan W. Corning, Artist Incognito, and I could surely sell encyclopedias as well as Big Dan. I was ready to begin.

God only knows what that battery of psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists had been charging up on before they concocted their door-opener. All of the long, hot afternoon I chanted it, "Good afternoon. My name is Jonathan W. Corning," but they did not open their doors to shake my hand as they were supposed to, and I only scraped my knuckles on unyielding screen doors. "I am doing a survey in this area," and standing there, pointing down the block and trying to look intently at the heat waves rising off the pavement, I would hear from the shadows inside the house, "What are you pointing at?" "It's a matter of a few questions. Might I step in?" and to extend my arm fully as the door-opener demanded, I would step back and find myself running in reverse down the stairs. One woman, her housewife uniform of shorts, halter, and curlers belying the fact that she was an admirer of Mae West, merely closed the door on my hand, remarking, "You better watch where you point that, sonny."

And that is how the afternoon went. The sun grew hotter and my ardour cooled. The streets of Grand Manor became entirely deserted and silent except for a forlorn tinkling every time a breeze stirred the hollow afternoon; not content with having every second house built the same, the citizens of Grand Manor had all graced their front porches with a variety of wind chime which I believe is known commercially as a Tinkle Tell.

I would trudge up the steps and ring the bell. Invariably the

sound was never ding-dong, but instead a fragment of music. It was usually something appropriate like the first few bars of Here Comes the Bride. Bing-bing-ba-bong and Mrs. Suburb would appear with five years of resentment at having the appearance of guests heralded by such a ridiculous sound. They refused to participate in the door-opener, each and every one of them, and it finally came home to me that while the door-opener might work at the golden door of opportunity, it was entirely ineffectual when confronting aluminum.

I started passing by houses, because they did not look promising, and soon I was simply walking up and down the deserted streets of Grand Manor. After four blocks I came to the edge of the sub-division and walked on into the field beyond the street. With the exception of survey tape and a huge sign proclaiming the field was destined to become "The Downs, Exclusive Housing for Discriminating People," I walked on what amounted to bald prairie. Ignoring what I assume must have been a travel brochure sweep of hill and sky, and ignoring the burs in my socks, I tried to make sense of the afternoon. I succeeded in going to sleep.

There is nothing lonelier than waking up in the middle of a huge field in the late afternoon. The heat had left the sky, and so although the sun had not set, it seemed perceptibly darker. The fluorescent survey tape had already begun to glow slightly with the coming evening, and the thought of Grand Manor became almost inviting. I met Big Dan at the pre-arranged corner. I was now one of the initiated and so we finally had something in common. Furthermore, in the gathering darkness his bulk was reassuring. He told me not to be discouraged because he had discovered that a rival firm had been through Grand Manor a week before us. That was heartening. One of my fellow salesmen had

made a placement, and that was heartening as well. But, best of all, I found we were going to an older district to work in the evening, a district I knew well and liked. The golden opportunities did not beckon through the windshield as on the Friday before, but I sat back in the car feeling at least a little more like the Jonathan W. Corning I knew and loved.

By the time we got to Bridgeland, I had remembered too much of the afternoon. True, it had seemed like a bad dream, but I knew that it had taken place. After passing up two blocks of houses and the New World Cafe because they did not look promising, I returned to the cafe to re-think the whole situation. I re-thought it, or, to be more precise, avoided thinking about it until a quarter to eight, and then finally decided to give my opportunities one last chance to shine. I chose the most genteel-looking house on the block. It was one of the older kind with two stories, bay windows, and a verandah, all set back behind a rambling lilac hedge. When I got to the door I saw it had been converted into suites, but I rang the bell for the main floor just the same. Like a bad dream, curlers, shorts, and halter, she appeared in the entrance-way light. She opened the door and stepped right out onto the verandah. I told her my name, but I did not extend my hand. I had decided not to leave it hanging in mid-air once again. I paused, waiting for her to say "What are you selling?" but all she said was "So what?"

I was so taken aback by the words and the level tone of her voice that I hurled my arm down the block and very nearly shouted that I was doing a survey in the area. I stood that way for a while, looking down the block, giving a passable imitation of Balboa on the Darien

Peninsula. When I finally checked to see how she was responding, all she did was stare right back at me. In a desperate effort to regain my savoir faire I dropped my voice an octave and went on to the next part.

"It's a matter of a few questions. Might I step in?" She stood for a long time, looking more through me than at me. She was standing so close to me that when I said "Might I step in?" I could not extend my arm properly, and I had to stand there with it tucked into my side, pointing as emphatically as I could by hooking my thumb into my belt and extending my finger. Finally she just said "Why not?" and walked into the house.

I went in and started my speech. She was sitting across the room with a cigarette and a glass of something. I remember hoping it was alcoholic, thinking maybe drunken people bought encyclopedias more readily than sober ones. I reached the point where I was telling her that I represented a million dollar concern that was doing a consumer survey, and was in a position to make her a very attractive offer, but her husband would have to be present. (They had made that clear to me in my week of instruction.) She laughed, but it was not a humorous sound. I said if he was out I could come back later, and she got up and moved to the mantelpiece. On it was a figurine, a ballerina made of porcelain. It was quite a tasteful thing actually, it had been painted nicely, and instead of a porcelain skirt, it had a skirt of real crinolin material with pearls all around the edge. It was doing a pirouette, and suddenly she started to turn it around. She would turn it around halfway and then take another hold on it and complete the revolution. I think she was trying to make the figurine appear as though it was dancing. I was just starting to wonder if something was wrong with her when she walked across

the room toward me. I remember thinking she seemed as awkward as the ballerina.

She sat down next to me and in a loud voice said, "Well, my husband is out with the boys tonight. Can't you make an attractive offer to a lady who's alone?" The shock must have shown on my face.

She put her hand quickly up to her hair, wisps of it were loose from the curlers and shining golden in the lamp light, and then her hand went down just as quickly, like paper fluttering, to her leg. She had a mosquito bite on her knee, and bits of her nail polish were coming off. She looked away. I packed up my sample book and left.

Outside the night was perfect, just like the "Serenade" in The Student Prince:

> Overhead the moon is beaming
> White as blossoms on the bough.
> Nothing is heard but the song of a bird
> Filling all the air with dreaming.
> Could this beauty last forever
> I would ask for nothing more, believe me.

For the first time I noticed the air was cooler. I had about an hour to wait before Big Dan picked me up, and consequently, half an hour before I had to start formulating my resignation speech.

I thought about how young she had seemed and how she had turned the ballerina around and around. Soon I was sad enough to start writing poetry. I chose the most gnarled tree I could find, pulled out my order blanks, and started to compose. I believe I was turning the woman into some sort of secret ballerina when, from one of the houses behind me, someone began playing scales on the violin. I stood up to hear better, the scales rising with me. There was my shadow on the ground over the shadows of the leaves, baggy suit coat, hair sticking out and one

shoulder pulled down with the briefcase. Just as the scale reached the top I remembered another high and clear sound from another night many years ago.

I was four or five, sitting under Cuthbert's lilac at the end of the block and listening to the others call "Ally Ally In Free." They were holding the "free" until the sound stretched out like a note on a violin. We had been playing "hide and seek" all evening. The person who was it would start to count and I would run to the top of the block, squeeze between the step and the lilac and sit down in the cool dirt. No one ever found me there. All I had to do was sit and watch, and I would see first one, then another make home base. Finally, someone would get caught and they would all stand around the street light and count to three. "Ally Ally In Free." And the high, childish voices would make the "free" travel out over every gravel crunchy back alley and bright lit street in the neighborhood. As the night went on the air became cooler and the lilac smell became sweeter and thinner. Under the street light everyone's lips became purple and their eyes shadowy so that we weren't the same people we saw every day. It seemed we should play forever.

The last time out I waited and waited and waited, but no one tried for home base. I couldn't even see the person who was it. For a while it just made me feel more special, knowing that sooner or later they would sing out and I could run once again down the rows of lawns, leaping sidewalks and hedges. No one appeared. For some reason I got angry and wished someone would get caught. No one did. Then a strange thing happened. I started to think I was the only person in the whole world and the thought froze me solid. I couldn't move until I started crying a half hour later. I walked home and in the bright light of the

kitchen asked my sister where she had been. She just said, "Where have you been? The game's been over an hour." I went to bed.

Standing under the tree I felt just like I had felt in the kitchen years before. I even said the words out loud, as if to taste them, "The game is over," and they seemed to make sense of everything that had happened. Months later I could still say them, and like an incantation, everything would seem a bit clearer. It does not work any more though. I thought that remembering all this might make the incantation work once again, but it doesn't.

In fact, now that I have arrived at the end of the story, I feel somewhat awkward, because suddenly even the words of the title do not work like they used to. I used to be able to remember a part of that spring and summer and then simply laugh and say "That was in my Student Prince period," and then push it aside. You would think that writing it all down would straighten it out, but perhaps sometimes the reverse is true. I suppose if I tried I could find a point later in that summer, after I quit the job, which would serve as an ending, but that is another story. I can't really remember what happened during the rest of that night. I probably just walked off down the street toward my rendevous with Big Dan, my salesman's shadow revolving around me as I passed under the street lights.

THE LAST DAYS OF BILLY'S EMPIRE

Almost as soon as I began writing these stories I knew I would write this story at the end. In fact, it was in the beginning, while I was writing "The Student Prince," that the title for this story appeared. I was reminiscing with an old school friend and he said, "Ah yes, that was in the last days of Billy's empire," and there was my title. I don't know why it seems so appropriate. Perhaps Billy had some previously unrecognized nobility about him, or perhaps the title just had the right sound to it, but it was as though I had those words in the back of my mind all along. It was to be a very orderly progression from "The Student Prince" to "The Last Days of Billy's Empire," but it has not worked out that way, and as each story has gone awry, I have told myself that I would get it right the next time. Now I am faced with my last opportunity, and I simply do not know where to begin.

I walk up the stairs every morning, sit down, and type THE LAST DAYS OF BILLY'S EMPIRE in capital letters. I get no further. The problem is not that the title has no conjuring power; on the contrary, it is an incantation that works every time. I find myself following Billy up to the roof of the school, my toga hiked up around my knees so that I can take the stairs two at a time. Or I remember following Billy down the main hall like an aide-de-camp as he reviewed the solemn rows of graduation pictures. I see Billy and me in the church, or in Latin class, or on the bluff overlooking the city, or in a hundred other places. Always he is in front of me. Like Hamlet and the ghost, I follow him.

All of which would be fine if there were some semblance of order to my memories, but there is none. I look for a place to begin,

and I find an ending. Finding an ending, I realize I have to say where it all began. I have tried just about everything. Even now beside my typewriter I can see yesterday's effort. I was playing Watson to Billy's Holmes. I took a piece of foolscap, divided it up into columns, and attempted to organize my knowledge of Billy. I headed the columns Appearance, Habits of Mind, Manners of Speech, Intellectual Interests, and on the far right hand side, Idiosyncrasies. I did not realize it yesterday, but nearly everything is in the far right hand column. My handwriting is neat and orderly at the top, but as I progress downwards it becomes more and more cramped, until at the bottom it almost wants to crawl around to the other side of the page. It was at that point that I gave up and looked out my window.

The sun was setting, and it had turned the river to gold. Pieces of white ice were floating in the current. It was beautiful. In fact, I see that I wrote the first line of a poem down in the empty Habits of Mind column--Ice, like angel feathers in a river of gold. I am not really sure what angel feathers look like, but I did not get a chance to expand the concept; a vivid memory intervened.

I remembered the last time I played by the river as a child. I am not sure how old I was, six or seven, perhaps younger. Suffice to say that I was the picture of boyhood innocence, and undoubtedly involved in some typical employment like killing minnows or frogs. It was August and the river had shrunk to mid-channel, and so I was playing on the exposed river bed. I discovered a set of footprints in the sun-dried clay. Some other child had obviously been playing there earlier in the year, and his footprints had hardened along with the rest of the river bed. The perfect match of my feet and the frozen footprints fascinated me. I am

not sure why I was so intrigued, but even now I find the thought attractive. Undoubtedly it has something to do with human beings making their mark upon the world, graffiti on washroom walls, and initials on trees--I leave it to the crackerbarrel philosophers.

I decided to retrace that other child's journey. Perhaps it was the heat of the day or the quiet mumbling of the river, but I had not gone more than fifteen carefully placed steps before I was convinced that I was retracing my own footprints. They led me towards a clump of willow on the river bank.

The willow was bannered with faded strips of tissue paper and string from the spring's highwater. Small pieces of driftwood, bleached white, were intertwined in the lower branches. There was just enough breeze to turn the leaves back and forth. Had I been as familiar with late movies then as I am now I would have recognized all the signs, but of course I walked around the bush. I did not find a party of freshly scalped settlers. Or, alternatively, I did not find the shrunken, but still recognizable head of one of the bearers who had disappeared two days ago. Instead I had to be contented with a real-life, albeit typical, prairie experience; I discovered a dead dog.

Of course, I had the normal boyhood experience of death in such categories of non-being as frogs and gophers and so forth, but never anything like a dog. What made the situation more problematical is that he had chosen to die directly upon two of my footprints. I could have just stepped around and resumed my journey further on, "circling ahead" in tracking parlance, but I did not. I wanted a closer look. His fur appeared wet and it swirled near the hip like suede that has been brushed against the nap. Perhaps it was some inner sense of orderliness, or

perhaps it was a need for some gesture of benediction, but I wanted to touch him and smooth his fur all in one direction. I knelt down awkwardly because my feet were still in the frozen footprints. Reaching forward, I overbalanced. My hand hit the dog high up near the hip. His leg swung open like a well oiled hinge. I was leaning over him like a sprinter, and flies rose directly into my face. I shut my eyes and felt a thousand small brushings on my skin. I heard a noise that was louder and more angry than any I can remember. I jerked up and away, out of my footprints and into the sun. I was spitting and shaking my head under the impression that the flies had gone into any available opening--my nose, mouth, eyes or ears. When I finally opened my eyes everything was just as it had been. The sun was still bright on the white clay, and the river still mumbled in the background. The flies that had boiled out from the inside of the dog were a glossy, well-fed, blue-black, green-black. I remember thinking that they were exactly the same colour as the eyes of the peacock feathers my grandmother kept in the umbrella stand in the hall.

All of which explains a number of things if you are inclined to be analytical. I prefer looking over the river to walking by it. I have no illusions about the so-called joys of boyhood. I suppose I even prefer angel feathers to those of the peacock. The ramifications are endless if you want them to be, but what the memory said to me was simply that it was time to get on with The Last Days of Billy's Empire. When the sights outside my window lead to places that are more unpleasant than what I have to deal with on this side of the glass, my path is clear. If Billy will not fit into my lists, then I will present him in fragments. You, gentle reader (whoever you are and if you are there), must simply imagine me sitting here by an upstairs window typing this, just as I am

obliged to imagine you sitting out there someplace listening to what I have to say. I have found a title for what I am doing. I call it a Rambling Reminiscence.

My window presents me with as good a place to begin as any: Billy on the Bluff. He would be appreciative of the pun. My window presents me with this possibility simply because it looks over the same river valley and the same city that Billy and I saw so many years ago. Granted, Longview High School, and the bluff nearby where Billy was so fond of standing, are more than a mile upstream, but the scene is analogous. Indeed, with very little imagination I could be convinced that my window frames the exact spot where Billy and I used to stand. It is the day I showed Billy the poem I was going to submit to the poetry section of the Longview Memorial. If I had known what to look for, I could have seen that day the trouble the poem would cause. I can see Billy and me clearly now.

Billy is looking up river and standing into the wind. As always his hair is blown up into points like comic book flames, or better still, like a crown. I am the smaller figure, sitting down, and from here looking strangely mis-shapen. I am looking in the opposite direction. Billy and I are strangely Janus-like.

There are fifteen or twenty gulls trapezing back and forth in the wind high over the river valley. Billy is feeding the gulls his peanut butter sandwich as he talks and his sentences are punctuated by the sweep of his arm. Even after all this time I can hear him talking. I do not remember his exact words, but I remember exactly what he was saying.

"Well Corning, I didn't mean to give the impression that I

don't like your poem." A crust is flung out. Three of the trapezes break, and three of the gulls begin a flapping journey downwards that ends in an agitated and unsure wobble down the slope at our feet. I realize that he enjoys the excitement his crust is causing, and I realize he is trying to do the same thing to me with his words.

"I mean I have seen worse . . ." He lets the sentence trail off, but I refuse to get up and wobble after it. The silence is broken by the swish of the nylon jacket as he throws the bread. The last of the sandwich gone, he throws out something that I am willing to wobble after.

"What I mean is it's not a bad poem, but there are some things I don't like. I mean, Corning, really, 'grotesque gargoyles'?"

"Alright, Billy, alright. What exactly is the matter with 'grotesque gargoyles'?"

"Corning, what are grotesque gargoyles? Have you ever seen one around here? Besides they are grotesque by definition."

Of course he had a point, but I felt then, as I feel now, that pointing out one line in the whole poem was unfair. Before I could say anything, however, Billy squatted down, crossed his eyes, and sucked in his cheeks.

"How is this," he said, and he stuck out his tongue. He was a highly grotesque and very pensive gargoyle in his contemplation of the river valley.

We laughed. The breeze picked up and the air brightened. I set my thermos between us and unscrewed the two cups on the top. "Music of the spheres," he said. And I said, "The gold sphere for the king, and I, the jester, take the silver." I poured the coffee. The spheres were in harmony and the disagreement gone. Even now, although I know what

comes next, the spheres are harmonious. The brown grass edges over the lip of the bluff into the white clay, and gulls swing back and forth over the river valley. I can hear the car approaching, but the two figures on the bluff have not noticed it yet. I do not want to disturb them. The city is bright and unreal across the river valley, and the whole of it is lit up by sunlight and brushed fresh by wind. The unfortunate words have been blown away leaving the air clear. The sound of the approaching car is louder.

I want to warn those two figures on the bluff that the music of the spheres is about to be interrupted by the ancient arc of a beer bottle thrown from a moving car. I want to warn my younger self that Billy is about to say something that is memorable because it sounds important, but makes no sense. They hear the car. They turn to look. There it is. The bottle flies through the air, and I scramble to one side. Billy simply watches it. The amber glass catches the sunlight and the words that follow the bottle begin their echo. "Eat your mother, Shitheads." I am still crouched on hands and knees with my eyes wide open in surprise, and Billy is laughing at me. It was then he issued his royal proclamation, unrolling it like a pennant, and even now I can see it snapping in the wind high over the city.

"That's what I mean, Corning. Poetry on the spring air. It's like good haiku."

I have since understood what he meant, but I will never agree. The obscenity of what they said, and the joy in their voices as they said it, constituted the haiku; surprise was always what Billy was after. I can admit there was some joy in that voice, absorbed, no doubt, from the fresh day and the sovereignty of a moving car, but poetry is not

jack-in-the-box shouting. A poem is completely different. Each line holds its words in place and you follow it word by word, line by line, away from the shouting and all the jacks-in-the-box to a place that is sure and calm. I know this as surely as I know that I am sitting here.

I have done enough for today. I deserve a cup of tea and my view from the window.

Today is a new day, and I find the trite comparison of a new day with a fresh sheet of paper unavoidable. I have been sitting here looking out my window. There is just a faint moistness on the glass, or, if you will allow it, a maidenly blush around the edges preludial to winter's frost. Billy would immediately want to draw pictures on it. He would draw small people running, jumping, and cavorting, turning my window into some kind of illustrated manuscript, or, in Billy's case, it would be more like tracking up a clean floor. He would call it art, but I am not going to accept any of his royal pronouncements today.

I have been watching the high school students on their way to school. They are wearing light jackets, but very soon they will change to big, bulky coats and leave for school while it is still dark. Muffled and silent in the half light, they will seem like monks and nuns going to morning prayers. It is perhaps foolish, but I wish they would hold candles.

I think of the walk Billy and I used to make to school every morning. You cannot see it from here, but I have my narrator's license and we can fly where we wish. I think the best place would be to perch with the sparrows on the roof of the church on Twelfth Avenue.

We find ourselves in the midst of the fabled Canadian winter. Chimney smoke, stained a washed-out pink from the rising sun, curls upwards to a height only possible on a completely windless day, or in a child's drawing. Down below, where the sun has not yet appeared, all is covered in shadows and snow, both of which are touched with blue. The pristine, Christmas card purity is waiting to be ploughed into ridges by tire tracks and footprints, and stained with the grey of exhaust and the yellow of dog urine. As sparrows, we are clustered around the chimney of the church for warmth. Imagine that we are truculent, with our feathers fluffed out as if we had our hands in our pockets and our collars turned up. We are the perfect avian parody of the street-corner gang, muttering "cheap cheap" about the girls who walk by, heads down and redlegged, followed by the boys who, in pants, can afford a slightly slower pace. Looking down towards Centre Street, we can see two figures who have lagged behind. Even from this distance they are identifiable. Young Corning wears the long black overcoat. Beside him, shambling in the mist, is Billy, wrapped around and around with a bright red and black striped scarf.

I suspect that one would have had to see Billy don his scarf to realize its significance. I waited for Billy, or even waited upon Billy, in the main hall many times while the robing took place. He would put the scarf over his arm, and then raise it to eye level, carefully pulling one side or the other until both ends just brushed the floor. He would then drape the scarf over his shoulders, carefully circle each half once around his neck, and pause for effect. Above our heads the graduation pictures would stare silently at their opposites across the hall, not deigning to notice their upstart progeny. Billy, in his turn, would be

likely to speak to them as he continued the complex muffling of his ears and nose, "Oh my forefathers, a cold day today. Winter has come and lucky you are to be safe and warm." He would put his coat on, and would walk to the end of the main hall and look out the windows of the new wing. If it were sunny, he would step back into the dimness of the main hall and make a last remark to the taciturn graduates, "You are warm here, my forefathers, but the sun," and he would pull his scarf towards his eyes, "the sun is blinding and bright. The snow is glistening. If only you could creep around the corner and look out. What sights you would see." He always treated the graduation pictures as though they were listening, and if you listened to him long enough, they actually began to assume some kind of collective personality.

During the time we took to consider Billy's habits of dress, the two figures we were watching have entered the church. How we are to follow Billy and my younger self into the church is problematic. As sparrows actually there is a way down, albeit unpleasant. The journey involves a common Canadian experience. Along with cold winters, we often remember having a bird in the house. Sitting upon the chimney they are overcome by smoke and tumble down inside like miniature, feathered Santa Clauses. I assume that they escape the flames by means of some furnace-like aperture. It comes to me now that there may be times when they miss their chance, and following the sparrows down the chimney could lead to a bundle of feathers not unlike the dead dog I encountered yesterday, and so we will forget that we are sparrows and observe, via my memory, what Billy would label a bit of humorous grotesquerie.

We would stop at the church only on very cold days and wait in the dim light from one of those artificially frosted windows until we

were warm. Stairs went up from the landing to the church proper. Stairs also descended into the basement. We knew it was the Sunday School because of the pictures, taped at ten-year-old eye level, which descended with the stairs into the shadows.

All the pictures were the same, and each had been coloured in by the children. Actually, each mimeographed sheet contained two pictures. One half of the page was entitled Sinful, and the other was entitled Holy. The two pictures were divided by a line, and constituted a kind of religious before and after advertisement, although which came first was not clear. Holy depicted a typical nuclear family, plus cat. Grandma was sitting quietly in the corner. Mother was knitting. Junior and Father were examining some article hidden from view, but judging from the beatific smiles on their faces, it was the finger of a saint, or a piece of the true cross. Little Sister was petting the cat.

Sinful depicted the same nuclear family in an exploded state. Little Sister was pulling the cat's tail. Grandma had her hands to her ears. Father's teeth were clenched and Junior was looking sullen (it occurs to me they looked as though they had discovered 'Made in Japan' printed on the bottom of the article they were previously examining, but that is beside the point.) Mother was approaching Little Sister and the cat in a highly ominous fashion.

Considering that each member of the Sunday School class probably had the option of colouring their picture the way they wished, there was a surprising degree of uniformity. For example, the title Sinful, written in jagged, Old Testament lightning strokes, was uniformly coloured in with black crayon, and the ferocity of the children's application frequently led to the colour there escaping the blue mimeographed line. Holy, on the

other hand, was depicted in evenly modulated capital letters, and coloured in with what I believe is known in the crayon trade as Flesh Pink. Mother was golden haired and Father was dark, and this polarity was complemented by Junior and Little Sister. I did not realize at the time how potently depressing these pictures were, and I begin to see the significance of Billy's term humorous grotesquerie.

At any rate, the purpose of this vignette was Billy's revelatory response to the pictures. On the winter day I am referring to and watching from some now undefined point, I had a great deal of difficulty in dissuading him from taking all of the pictures home with him. Words were spoken.

"Corning, stick to poetry. Don't pretend you know anything about pictures."

"All I want to know Billy is what you want them for."

He turned to me and in his proclamation voice said, "Well, J. W., variations on a theme. Every great artist does variations on a theme."

"I know that, Billy, but would you kindly tell me where is the variation and what is the theme."

"Look closer, Corning," he said, "the poet should always look closer."

What did he mean? I hesitate to put words in his mouth, but turning now to review those pictures in my mind, as I turned then to review them on the wall, I can now see a possible variation. Looking down the line of pictures as they descend into the shadows, I note the bottom right hand corner of each mimeographed sheet. Did you mean the signatures, Billy, the childish lettered signatures? I can see that the

names all start clear and legible, but inevitably the child has not left enough room so that the last letters turn up or down or reflect back upon themselves. The result is the spidery web of lines known universally to grade three teachers as "chicken tracks." I see now, perhaps for the first time, that Billy is not as unfathomable as he would have had me believe.

I am tempted to leave off today with this small victory, but I have yet to reach what I suppose could be called the climax of this particular Reminiscence.

Above the stairs was a picture of Jesus blessing the children. It was a typical picture of Jesus, wispy beard, spaniel eyes and soft smile. There were one or two hallowed children looking up into his eyes, and a number of anomalous Greek columns behind him. The effect of this picture is such that the children descending the stairs to Sunday School pass directly beneath it and might seem to be receiving the blessing. When I turned back from the examination of the mimeographed sheets, Billy had just moved away from writing something on the picture. Looking closer, I discovered he had drawn a fly on the knee of Jesus. Surveying his work, Billy said, "You never see any flies around Jesus. It's unrealistic." Of course we laughed, but looking at it now in my memory I see for the first time that he made a terrible, terrible change. If only I could be sure that he knew what he was doing, or even that he was unaware. Either way, I see it now. The hand that was raised to bless the children is now raised to swat the fly. The spaniel eyes have become as cold as ice. In the dim light from the permanently frosted window above the door, I see that the wispy smile has become even colder than the eyes.

Who am I writing this to? Who are you gentle reader? When I

started these stories I felt I knew you, but now I am not sure. Perhaps I am writing this story to Billy and that is why I let him lead me to such unforgiving places. But how much control can he have? I am the one who types this, not him. My margins are fully in place and the print fills the pages evenly, uniformly, even now as I watch. Wherever he leads me it will not be off the page. He can stand on the margin forever with his hair blown up in points but it will not get him anywhere. I know that I am not in complete control. I am pressing the buttons, but I know the black and white leads me down to the bottom of the page, towards Billy standing on the edge of the roof while the physical education class sends the slap of their running shoes on the courtyard up to mingle with the snap of Billy's toga in the wind. But I can find memories that don't lead me to places like this, and if I cannot find them, I simply do not have to come up here again.

It has been four days now since I was last up here with my typewriter and the view from my window. Given the amount of time I have left before the new building opens and I return to work, I suppose I must consider the lapse as serious. I have been pottering about downstairs, trying to convince myself that everything from reorganizing the kitchen cupboards to reorganizing the living room furniture is more important than finishing this. I was halfway through counting up two years' worth of accumulated pennies from the jar on top of the refrigerator when it finally occurred to me that I was purposefully avoiding this room. I know that I was disturbed by my last reminiscence of Billy, but four days

absence is hardly justifiable. My typewriter, after all, is not explosive, poisonous, or otherwise lethal. I know that this is a Rambling Reminiscence and not a confessional, but now, having confessed in black and white, my frame of mind is a bit clearer.

Outside my window it is very clear and cold. I see that in my absence the mist on my window has crept inwards, and at the very bottom it is substantial enough to be called frost. Up the river valley I can see the blue line of mountains and, as always, they please me. I think I like them because they make an edge for my world. As a child I had a very mixed reaction to the idea of a round earth. On one hand I had a condescending chuckle for the simpletons who told Columbus he would fall off the edge, but on the other hand, I was vaguely attracted to the thought that after a certain limit one could expect the abyss with its attendant demons and monsters. I believe I felt that if one did not step over the boundary, the demons and monsters would politely reciprocate by staying on their side. I do know that on the one or two family occasions when we travelled towards my mythical boundary I became violently nauseous. However, before anyone becomes analytical with equal violence, I should note that I was prone to car sickness.

I do not give much credence to the inanities of childhood. I know there are those who make a great deal of the mystery of the child and I do not wish to judge them, but my own case simply precludes any such illusions. The things I am able to toll up from my childhood resemble more the Saturday funnies than they do the threads of some intricate tapestry. In fact, I suspect that this whole discussion of world view, flat versus round, stems from my past.

During yesterday afternoon's cup of tea I used the tea set my

grandmother left me. The tea set is, if you will pardon the pun, a singularly tasteless set of objects which were undoubtedly collected by my grandmother over years of careful searching. The tea pot is an old woman of the here-is-my-handle-here-is-my-spout variety. I believe she bears a resemblance to Queen Victoria in the later years of her reign. The sugar bowl is a fresh-cheeked, milkmaid sort of figure who is obligingly holding her apron out in a spherical fashion for the sugar. Finally, the least garish of all is a cream server with a courtier painted on both sides. He is doffing his hat in a generous manner such that when the cream is poured he seems to bow. The last sunlight was coming in under the blind and it lit up the tea tray, giving the impression that it existed in some kind of void with shadows above and shadows below; it was a miniature, horizontal world. Of course, as in all childhood reminiscences that one reads, the tea-time litany that my grandmother used to recite for me ran through my head. Although the memory had the inevitable twist at the end of it, I must admit that I enjoyed it while it lasted.

You must imagine yourself as a child sitting at eye level to the table. Hands appear, godlike from nowhere, to arrange the tea things. My grandmother's voice is dry and dusty, as though some of the chalk-like powder she spread so liberally upon her person has found its way into her larynx.

"Here is Old Mrs. Tea, and here is Miss Sweet, and here is Sir White." The cups would then appear. She collected floral patterned cups, but for some reason she never acquired a complete set of any one pattern.

"Buttercups for Jonathan, the thorny, thorny Rose for Roderick, and the Lilies for me."

Thus far, in my opinion, the memory is rather good. The small child, the miniature tea world, especially the part about my grandmother's voice, and the clouds of pipe smoke that literally wreathed my grandfather's head all seem the proper stuff of childhood reminiscence. However, if you look closely you can see a flaw in the picture; my grandfather always got the thorny, thorny Rose. The pouring of the tea had its own incantation.

"And now the old woman waters the Buttercup, waters the Lily, and, last of all, the thorny, thorny Rose."

Now we must imagine a mis-shapen, almost satanic hand hövering over the thorny, thorny Rose. My grandfather had told me many times how he had cut his thumb off while back on the farm. This accident had occurred in the good old days before immediate access to a doctor was available, or for that matter, even necessary. He had stoically bound up his thumb with his handkerchief and continued working. Looking at the ragged white scar on his otherwise brown hand, I always felt he had put his thumb back on the wrong way. I would watch this hand descend over the thorny, thorny Rose and listen for the bathtub draining noise of his first sip. He would then utter what I now recognize as a crude, but serviceable witticism.

"Prim old Mrs. Tea has kept her water to herself too long again. A woman her age should know enough to . . ."

I never found out what course of action Mrs. Tea in the wisdom of age should have taken, because my grandmother would interrupt with a remark about young Jonathan not wanting to hear his crudities. My grandfather, excited by his show of wit and undoubtedly wanting to get even for years and years of the thorny rose, would continue.

"I better see if little Miss Sweet can help me out." The big brown hand would ravage Miss Sweet's apron and come up with exactly four lumps of sugar. He would say, "Thanks, Sweety," and sputter and chuckle all over both the spice cake and the anthropomorphic pieces of porcelain.

So you see that my childhood simply does not sustain a close examination for such things as mystery and profound insight. But, oddly enough, I have enjoyed writing it all down. It is something like the unlikely combination of sadness and happiness you feel when looking through an old notebook.

I suppose I can justify this morning under the heading Limbering Up. As well, now that I think about it, there is a connection to Billy. He always enjoyed looking down upon worlds, from the bluff, from the roof of the school, or from a hundred other ad-libbed thrones, so my perusal of the tea table is directly on topic. More importantly, Billy can only be another Sir White, or, at worst, a thorny, thorny Rose. In short, he is mine to manipulate. I have been afraid that he would be too flamboyant, but now I see I might have to prop him up. Perhaps I have exorcised a devil and can get on with writing a story.

I have done enough for this morning, and I am happy with what I have accomplished. The clarity of light outside my window beckons me. I think I will go out walking. I have just noticed that today the noise of the city sounds like a harbour. Who knows what else I will discover?

I do not know how to begin tonight. Normally I could write something about the way the day looks, but, oddly enough, Jonathan Early-to-bed-early-to-rise Corning could not sleep, and so here I am in the middle of

the night. I believe that just before I left this morning I wrote I was feeling slightly giddy and was going out for a walk. I stayed out all day. People were raking leaves. People were covering their rose bushes with mulch. People were washing storm windows, undoubtedly with vinegar and water, and then with red knuckles and stiff fingers they were trying to force the back window on the front frame and so forth, exclaiming loudly that next spring they would properly mark the windows. It seemed that everyone was engaged in tasks that in a curious way anticipated spring rather than winter. Everyone but me. And I did not mind at all. I walked up River Drive, and for the first time in years I imagined myself suffering for my art in every attic room I saw. I had an extraordinarily good day, and I suspect I would be sleeping now but for the way my walk ended.

By late afternoon I found myself in front of the new building. It is almost finished. Of course I could not see my office, but I rubbed the dust from one of the ground floor windows and looked inside. From what I remembered of the blueprint I knew I was looking at the audio-visual complex, but all I could see was a labyrinthine collection of two by four studding. There were what seemed to be the skeletons of hundreds and hundreds of small rooms. I thought that some horrible mistake had been made, but in the next instant I realized that I was looking at the individual learning area in its unfinished state. I felt foolish because the original suggestion of a number of private rooms, suitably equipped with recording and projecting devices for individual study, had been mine. Having recovered from my initial shock, I put my nose to the glass and looked with renewed interest. The regular rows of two by fours suddenly blurred, and before my eyes turned into a dense forest. The individual

learning area became a geometrical nightmare, and although I tried to avoid it, the thought kept appearing that I was looking at a collection of barred cages for some creature no larger than a small dog. I saw the exposed wiring where the baseboard should have been, and I remember thinking that all I had to do was follow the wire with my eyes to make sense of it all. The cable ended in a hand-like clutch of smaller wires, just below my chin on the other side of the glass.

I stepped back in horror and discovered that I had been fooling myself. I had forgotten that I was looking through a window. My breath had misted the glass, and the result was blurred vision. Of course I laughed, and I did not even bother looking again because I knew I would only see half-finished rooms. But now, sitting here and writing this, I find I am still slightly disturbed, and I wonder what I would have seen. At any rate, I do not think I will go back there again until it is finished.

And so you see, gentle reader, I was lying downstairs, unable to sleep and uncertain of whether I was giddy or upset or simply over-tired from walking, and I decided to come up here to talk it over with Billy. Halfway up the stairs I began to feel like Wolfe making his night attack on Montcalm. In fact, Billy and I could be any number of famous pairs. I am Frankenstein working late on my monster, or Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I am becoming carried away. It is not hysteria. Actually, I think it is festivity.

It comes to me now that tonight feels like the night of the school play. The association is not so unlikely. If my memory serves me well, the essence of acting in the school play was the strange combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity. For example, one went to school by the

same route, but on the night of the play it was by streetlight rather than sunlight and entering the school by the teachers' door made the hallway seem familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

There was always a table beside the auditorium door for the hats of the fathers. They sat there in neat rows like a disembodied audience. When I was eight years old and waiting in the hall to go onstage for the first time in my life, I practiced my lines on the hats. Donna Shaney, a particularly obnoxious little girl who said often and openly that she was going to marry me when she grew up, motioned to me from the door that our moment in the footlights was approaching. An actor at heart, I carefully and superstitiously stepped exactly in the center of each red tile as I made my way towards my debut.

I remember our lines with an unfortunate clarity. She was to say, "Oh. Look at all the cherry trees," and gesture wide with her arms. Although I knew the cherry trees were only pretend, that night I could almost see them growing around us. She sighed in the special, audible way that Mrs. Porter had taught her, "I wish we lived on the farm." I put my hands on my hips and replied, "My father was a farmer." When Donna said "Was he really!" I stuck out my chest in what Mrs. Porter had described as a proud way and said, "He sure was. My mother says that when he was in his younger days he sowed plenty of wild oats."

I was standing there with my absurd eight-year-old chest stuck out as far as possible and my hands on my hips when from the darkened gymnasium floor came the strangest sound. I did not know that my lines were supposed to be funny, and at first I did not recognize the sound as laughter. I looked over to Mrs. Porter in the wings. She was laughing as well. She had never laughed during rehearsal. Out in the darkness

the laughter continued, as disembodied as the hats in the hall. I was afraid. I do not forgive Mrs. Porter, even to this day, for the loneliness I felt while standing there.

I am not afraid now, but I do feel alone. I think I could even welcome laughter from the darkness. Outside my window the city will be ordered in a new way, as well. The electric light will have removed any sense of depth from the scene. Of course, there is depth and shadow, but it is well defined, black and white, almost like the illusion of depth from a stage set. My window is misted over with the chill of the night, and the lights melt as they pass through the glass. Down on the bluff there will still be one or two late lovers, their cars idly puffing out gentle and abrasive clouds of exhaust. The windshield and side windows will be steamy, and believe it or not, I can even hear the sounds inside the cars. Do you hear it? It is the swishing rustle of nylon ski jackets.

Tonight I approve. Tonight there will be none of the old J. W. moralizing on the proper aesthetics of young love. In fact, tonight my approval is general. I approve of the night. I approve of the young lovers. I approve of the city. I even approve of Billy. There. My approval is in official black and white. I have been fighting him too long, and tonight I feel lonely. I feel lonely, and it's a relief to discover the feeling and write it down.

Let us have a conversation, Billy. Let us try to agree. If you will stop your proclamations, then I will try to listen. You are my character, here with me behind my steamy window. I know that some might snicker at our parallel to the young lovers on the bluff, but you and I know that is not the case. I simply want to talk to someone. And I know

that some might laugh, saying that Corning is off balance and talking to himself, but can you hear even the slightest, suppressed chuckle? There is no audience out there in the dark. I would welcome their laughter, but it is not forthcoming because they simply do not exist. My gentle reader and my gentle reader's friends are simply a figment of my imagination, so why should I worry about them now?

There. I have abandoned them. Now I am alone. It is quiet here but for the sound of the typewriter. Soon the lights of the city will blink out one by one, leaving a perfect blackness. Speak to me, Billy. There is no one here but me to listen. No one has followed me up the stairs. No one is here to see. Make yourself known. I will type, but the page is yours. Go ahead Billy, speak. Speak.

"Well Corning." That is how you would begin, Billy. Am I right? You would say, "Well Corning." I do not mean to interrupt, but I know you so well.

"Well Corning, are you sure you want to do this?" No, Billy, I'm not sure, but tonight I am festive and tonight I am lonely and I do not even know how I can be both at the same time, but tomorrow I can rip this conversation up, so go ahead. It is getting late.

"Right you are, Corning, right you are. It is late, very late. Do you know the sign on the top of the Daily Chronicle Building? Of course you do. Do you know what it is saying? Use your mind's eye. There is no need to disturb your reflection in the glass, and I know how fingerprints on the window would disturb you."

There is no need to pretend you know me so very well, Billy. You never did, and besides, I have a clock on my desk that says two forty-five, and that is all the Chronicle clock will be saying.

"No, Jonathan, there is a vast difference. I spoke of it once. Do you remember? On your clock the hands go around and around, following each other on the same old track. That comforts you whether you realize it or not. But the time on the Chronicle Building is much different. There on the electric path eleven stories in the air the numbers step over each other and move quickly to the corner."

I know that, Billy, you are not telling me anything I do not already know. The sign goes all the way around the building, and sometimes it gives the temperature, and sometimes a headline. For that matter, it has its own track as much as my clock does.

"But you are missing the point, Jonathan. As always you are missing the point. The point is that you are not sure what the sign says after the numbers disappear around the edge of the building. Let me tell you what is being flashed into the night on the other side, Jonathan. Change into your capital letters because it is being flashed a foot and a half high so the entire city can see it. IT IS SAYING IT'S ABOUT TIME IT'S ABOUT TIME IT'S ABOUT TIME IT'S ABOUT TIME. Time for what, Corning, time for what? Well, we will just shelve that question for the time being."

I knew you would say that, Billy. It is nearly three in the morning and I am too tired to think, but I knew you had to say we would shelve the question.

"There is more, Corning, much more. Do you remember that huge cowboy with the clock in his lariet, the one who welcomes the tourists from atop the city hall parkade? He has managed to turn thirty degrees, Jonathan, and he is looking in your direction. He has started to recoil his rope, and his paint is peeling so that in the electric light his

smile of welcome has become jagged. You know what you have been avoiding. You have seen it, but you will not admit it. The hour is getting late, Corning, and you cannot circle around it forever."

Billy, you were not supposed to make any proclamations. You poor ghost, you are trying to frighten me. Surely you realize you are only a part of my imagination. I can send you away anytime I wish simply by pressing the right buttons. Cock-a-doodle-doo. There. The cock has crowed in nothing less than black and white, and the time of ghosts is finished. You must leave me alone. I want to go to bed so you must let me be. I can deal with all this tomorrow.

The thought of a reader out there someplace must be essential. I thought I had abandoned you, gentle reader. I thought that you were some sort of literary convention that could be discarded, but in my embarrassment about the excess of three nights ago I sense your presence; if I still worry about the possibility of your harsh judgement, then you must still be there. All that I can say about my exchange with Billy is that I was overwrought.

I feel rested this morning, and if you will indulge me a little further I believe I can partially explain the problems I have been facing. For the past few days my typewriter has been silent. I have spent all my time up here simply sitting and letting my window frame decide what I would see. The glass is now well frosted around the edges, and so I have been looking out of what amounts to a circular frame. I am well aware that employing my time in such a fashion might seem odd. It occurred to me that the children passing by on their way to school might well imagine

me as one of the round framed portraits of ancestors who perpetually think profound thoughts from dim-lit dining room walls. Actually, they probably do not notice me at all, and even if they did I could not credit them with so much imagination. At any rate, it was the thought of frames and this morning's cup of coffee that gave me what I suppose I must consider as a minor revelation, and, incidently, the impetus to begin my story anew.

I had set my cup of coffee on the window ledge to cool, and its heat melted the frost on the bottom of my window to the width of my cup. If you have followed me thus far you will realize what I saw when I lifted the cup up. The circular portion of my window that was still transparent now had a notch at the bottom. It was a keyhole. I have described this moment in detail simply because it suggested the solution to the difficulties I have been having. Plot is the key. If I had not been holding a cup of coffee I would have jumped up and shouted it. Plot is the key.

These past days I think I must have been trying to catch the nuances of Billy, and I have collected random notes, none of which tie together. But plot is the structure on which to hang all these reminiscences. Quite simply, plot is the frame which allows one to see what is useful and what is not. We do not need to go back to Aristotle to discover its usefulness. In fact, we need go no further back than to the beginning of these reminiscences. You will recall that at the outset of all this I attempted, if you will pardon the pun, to rule King Billy into a piece of foolscap. I now see that I was mistaken to pass over Watson's technique so easily because, in essence, it is the same technique that Holmes uses. Organization, Discipline and Control are the passwords.

These three things are behind every one of Holmes' solutions no matter how spontaneous they may seem. Time after time he is described with his face flushed and his eyes turned to the ground in total concentration as he relentlessly follows the trail of clues until he discovers the real identity of the murderer. Plot is the trail of clues which we must follow to the end of a story.

I confess I do not know if I more resemble Holmes, Watson or Conan Doyle, but it is abundantly clear to me that I must follow the main action of the story step by step. Of course, I am left considering what the main action of the story should be, but once again my window frame suggests the solution. It has been staring me in the face all along: Billy did not want his picture taken, framed, and hung with the rest of the graduation pictures in the main hall. I know better than anyone that it is all more complex than a simple aversion to photographs, and that is probably why I have avoided that aspect of Billy to this point. For the first time, however, I feel I have a sense of direction. I must follow it. For the first time I feel that my typewriter is leading me somewhere other than to Billy standing at the edge of the roof while strains of the choir's singing rise to mingle with the snap of the flags in the wind. And so I have no choice but to write of the main hall.

There is no wind to snap flags today. It snowed last night, and judging from the dirty white of the clouds it could snow again today. It is not the first real snow of winter which blankets the ground and absorbs the noise of the city. Instead it is more like surprised rain, and it melts when it hits the pavement. It stays on the ground only in the long grass around fence posts and vacant lots as though it were vagrant and wishing to be someplace else. I am trying to make it sound

more interesting than it really is. Actually, having formed the resolve to go to the main hall, I am reluctant, but I must begin someplace.

Longview High School was built in a transition period. The idea that a school was a community's pride and joy, and shrine to learning, was on its way out. Accordingly, the school of architecture that would have the building resemble one of those antique mantle clocks where little men appear from surprising places to strike gongs was also on the wane. Longview had been built with the spirit of modernity, and all that remained of former glories was the vaulted ceiling of the main hall and a small boxlike room on the top of the school, that had once served as a kind of bell tower, but had since been converted into working space for the staff of the Longview Memorial, the school's yearbook.

It has just begun snowing, and throughout the city housewives will be drawing in their laundry, and both their fingers and their sheets will be stiff with cold. Businessmen will be hurrying to lunch and wishing they had worn their winter coats to work. People will look more often to see if the bus is coming, and sales clerks will intersperse their sales talks with references to the coming of winter. I mention all of this only because we are about to leave it all behind in our journey down the main hall. My conversational tone is not appropriate. I must be serious as I gaze down its length. The main hall demands the rounded and full phrase.

By an orderly progression our eyes are drawn upwards. Dark green and dark blue, the tiles step geometrically towards either side of the hall and the banks of green lockers. The lockers, upright and solemnly conscious of their duty regardless of the trivia they presently harbour, lead our eyes upwards to the graduation pictures, which in turn

march at evenly spaced intervals down both sides of the hall, and even though the blank faces cluster protectively around the portrait of the school which sits at the center of each plaque, our eyes are drawn even higher until our sight is lost in the incredibly smooth, deeply shadowed, cathedral-like arc of the vaulted ceiling of the main hall. Just as sight is drawn upwards, words also escape above the graduation pictures, and echo in the vault long after having been spoken. It was either Billy or I who once said that its smoothness ached for stars.

We step through the archway, out of the brightness of the east wing, and begin to walk. The turbulence of sunlight coming in the west wing windows at the other end of the hall attracts us immediately, making the space before us seem even more dim. We step through the first of five bars of sunlight which come through the windowed classroom doors and section the hall into fifths. Years of chalk dust and pencil shavings have taken the moisture from the air, and years of spilled ink have given the dryness a cool undertone. We have left the noise of the city behind. Sounds filter in from the outside, but they are stripped of their meaning by brick and plaster and, abstracted from their source, they reveal a purity. Lines from Mrs. Duffield's aging geography lectures become timeless. "East and west, north and south, even up and down, all these are arbitrary concepts and useful only in a relative sense. Now I want you to think about that, 2-B." Turning and walking down the other side of the hall we hear a touch of, perhaps, the future indicative, being chanted out like a hopeful prayer, "educar, educeris, educetur." From the chemistry comes the assertion of ammonia, and from biology the insinuation of formaldehyde. Once again the noises of the city approach. But right here, by the honour roll for the Second World War, they sound

like a symphony heard from the lobby, tuning its instruments.

I am, after a fashion, happy here, and I would gladly remain. But, of course, Billy is clamouring to speak. He filled the main hall with more than his share of observations, and I can hear their echoes. It seems to me now that in all our journeys down its length almost everything he said was directed towards me.

"We begin in the year of our Lord 1909. A propitious year, Jonathan, one and the multiples of three. You will notice there are no silly smiles on their faces. They were all fresh from the farm and involved in the serious business of wilting." They were definitely wilted by the time Billy and I looked at them. The portraits had been hand-tinted, and all fifteen of them had unnaturally flushed cheeks as though suffering from some terminal disease.

"Right you are, Corning," he said. "Right you are. They are suffering from a terminal disease, and right here," he pointed to the honour roll of the First World War, "right here it terminated for three of them. You may check the names at your leisure. However, there are still those who linger on."

I did check. The names Cecil J. Arlington, Ronald Bateman, and James Marion Bores were all written again in raised brass letters on the honour roll a few years down the hall. A memory comes to me from shortly before my grandfather died. He was looking through the photo album and he said something which confused me a great deal, even though I was nearly twelve at the time. It was a picture of two men, both looking improbably young and upright in front of some farm building. I asked who they were, and I remember his foolish looking hand, unsteady in the last two years of life, very carefully pointing to each and pronouncing the name.

"That man's name was Henry Luce. He always had a joke. He died in the first war. He was one of the lucky ones. And that was Roderick Corning." He paused. "That was me."

Oddly enough, whenever I see an honour roll I can still become confused about whether it means they died, or received good marks, or were lucky in some incomprehensible fashion.

"Forget the honour roll, Jonathan. Here in 1923 we have a moment of real significance, a turning point. Do you see it?"

I did not see it. 1923 did not seem substantially different from 1909. There were a few more graduates, and their faces were not hand-tinted, but they were just as faded and just as blank.

"Look closer, Jonathan. Look closer. We have here the first smile. Miss Amelia Warburg, third row in the center, right next to the portrait of the school. The gay twenties and Amelia was perhaps a notorious fledgling flapper. Her smile is in a good state of preservation, wouldn't you say? Of course, there is something wrong with the eyes, but I think that is just flyspecks on the glass, and if we could convince the janitor to clean the picture she would be as bright as ever."

Do I hear a note of desperation in Billy's voice? I wonder if the ridiculous rhetoric was there only to cover something up. Or is it just my memory supplying the tone? But he would never stop for very long in front of one year.

"Hurry along, Jonathan. Here is another high point. I have asked you about this one before. Do you see the significance? 1939, but it is not the war we're after. No? Look at the background, Jonathan. For the first time it is black. They appear in a void, and no longer is there the suggestion of clouds in the backdrop behind their freshly

brushed hair. They have gone into the cities, Jonathan. They are no longer sons and daughters of pioneers. It was the dirty thirties that blackened the background. It turned them into money conscious existentialists and rubbed off the innocence, but from our vantage point we can see it was no great break. Time heals everything, Jonathan. That is the lesson of the pictures. A skin of dust covers the wounds."

I can hear it. There is desperation in his tone, and I can hear it as we cross the hall and start back towards the present. Now I wonder what he was looking for. Did he finally discover it? I wonder.

"We are moving towards the present now, Jonathan. The bright smiles after the war, the brushcuts changing to pompadours. Hurry along, get the whole picture. Watch it all growing, Jonathan, in leaps and bounds as one year steps over the next."

We almost ran past the last years. As we approached the present the faces should have become more clearly focused, but they became more numerous and seemed to blur and fade more quickly. It seems to me now that we were always out of breath when we came to the blank space in the wall. The same question was always asked, although it may have been phrased differently each time, and I see now that I never gave the right response. Even on that last day, adjusting our togas, I could have heard him, but I did not.

"It's a frame up, Jonathan, a frame up. I won't be put up there, and if you would open your eyes you would see why. Look closer. You can't miss it."

I know what he wanted me to look at. He wanted me to look at the portrait of the school in the center of each plaque. I know that is what he wanted because of what he later did, and because of what he later

did I have avoided looking there. But I have come this far, and I cannot turn around now. I see that he followed the graduation pictures as blindly as I followed him. If helping Billy in his quest will help me understand mine then I will look again. The pictures are locked firmly in my mind and I can shuffle them like a deck of cards any time I wish. But not today. Not right now, at least.

The snow is not falling today, but the cold continues. I do not understand why I should wish to discuss the weather every morning, but it comforts me to gaze out upon the state of the day. "The state of the day" is a particularly dignified phrase. It seems reminiscent of the State of the Union Address, or even the Speech from the Throne; I suppose I am rambling. The frost on my window has not progressed except that the notch created by the coffee cup has filled in once again. But do not jump to conclusions. The keyhole may have disappeared, but I still have the key. I know what my next step must be, and I am quite resigned to taking it, regardless of the consequences. If you like you may call it trust in providence, but I am not so sure that there is a deity that has time to watch every sparrow fall. I am more inclined to think I am simply weary.

This morning I find that I am tempted to touch the frost on my window. I remember that as a child I would become so enamoured with its icinged whiteness that I would reach out and touch it, and then, inevitably, I would carve my name on it with my fingernail. Finally, I would put my finger in my mouth to see if the frost tasted as good as it looked. It was always stale with nicotine or whatever else was floating

in the air. I knew my name would spoil the miniature white forest, and yet I touched it. I knew it would be stale, but I tasted. Now, even knowing all this, I am tempted to begin again by touching. I do not understand such contradictory impulses, but this morning I will let them be.

I have decided something of importance. I am going to make Billy a hero. I have made this decision for the sake of my story, and because it seems to offer the only possibility for achieving a proper ending.

Yesterday, after I finished writing, I went back over the graduation pictures, paying special attention to the picture of the school that sits in the center of each plaque, and since then they have been running through my head over and over again.

The particular effect of the pictures of the school arises from the fact that each year the photograph has been taken from the same place. The view we receive is from far enough down Tenth Street so that the entire school sits squarely in the picture. Tenth Street runs, as it were, directly into the main doors of Longview, so a portion of the street is included in each photograph.

In 1909, Longview sits on bald prairie. Somewhere off to the left what I now refer to as the older part of the city is rapidly approaching with its paint as yet unpeeled and its corners still sharp. There are no houses or trees in the picture, so the building could be a doll house or a school for giants. It is hard to picture anyone, especially the nine faded graduates on the plaque, walking through the doors of the school. As the next picture appears, two rows of spindly saplings march in on either side of the picture, and turn at right angles

as if to troop in the front doors. In the wink of an eye they grow a foot higher, and a metal picket fence erupts in front of them. The building begins to attain proportion. A hedge is planted which in three yearly bites consumes the picket fence, but the saplings jerk up out of its reach. New cement suddenly pours from the main doors towards the street, then turns with the hedge along the front of the school yard. Outside of the tidy frame, in Europe, James Marion Bores, Ronald Bateman, and Cecil J. Arlington probably think longingly of their school days, but there is no sign from the school, except that during the war years the pictures were taken alternately on windy and windless days; the flags on the school jump up and down in some indecipherable semaphore.

After the war the film speeds up and the number of graduates increases. Light standards strike the boulevard in front of the school at evenly spaced intervals. A car is parked in the left of the frame. It disappears, then reappears to the right with its shape changed. Ivy grows up the wall, and as Longview attains respectability a shell game begins and cars are whisked up and down the street by a hand that is faster than any eye. The saplings grow into trees which branch forth and are pruned so that they seem to be waving at someone down the street. The graduates multiply and divide, and the film begins to move even faster. Somewhere out of the picture the economy fails and boxcars carry men. Bread lines form, then cross and intersect, becoming mobs. The graduates stare out at the hall impassively as vines snake up the front wall of Longview and claim the lip of a window and the brow of a door. The street hardens with pavement. The east wing is added, and the increase in size makes the school step forward. A "For Sale" sign appears on the lawn of the house that protrudes into the right hand corner of the

picture, while in the newspapers headlines of the same size declare war. The bush in the left hand corner of the picture is alternately flowerless and blooming in staccato bursts of lilac. Somewhere out of the picture machines rush at each other and explode, while vines claim the frame of another window. The graduates stare out like shareholders. The west wing appears behind the foliage which is billowing up like clouds of smoke.

The film continues, but there is no need to stay and see the end. In fact there is no ending. It is like an interminable keystone kops movie, and no matter how many times the train just misses the car, or how many times the cars collide and everybody falls out, you can count on them getting back in and resuming their fidgety, silent chase. The pictures of the graduates become smaller and smaller to accommodate their numbers, while at the center the building continues to grow.

Yesterday, as I began to realize that graduates could never get up and leave, I felt the beginnings of a hard, bright anger. Throughout it all they had remained as blank and faceless as if they never looked or thought once about what was happening. I saw that as the school grew the graduates became smaller, more numerous, and more blurred as if they were feeding the school with their own vitality. I could not forgive them. I turned my anger towards myself for being exactly the same as them for all these years. I even had enough anger left over for you, gentle reader, for you have been faceless and impassive as well. As unlikely as it may seem, I rose, clenched my fists, and shook them at the city. It was a pure anger and it washed away all the contradictions. I said yes to Billy. I said yes to his refusal to say cheese and feed the picture at the center of the plaque. I said yes to his defiance of all the

unthinking faces, and I repented all the years I had thought him foolish.

Finally, in the brightness of my anger, I saw, or thought I saw, that Billy was a hero.

Of course, the last thing my anger washed away was itself. One cannot type with clenched fists and I am obviously here typing this morning. My certainty has disappeared, and the contradictions have returned, but as I mentioned earlier, I am resigned, even peaceful. I have seen what Billy saw, and although I do not understand it perfectly, I do see it is terribly important. I also see that my typewriter is truly leading me to some understanding, and so I have decided to include what Billy did to my poem. Indeed, I now see that it was inevitable that I would have to include it. I am not overly bothered that I must do so. I have been embarrassed so many times now that once more will not matter. There are so many questions left unanswered. Tomorrow Billy and I will rehearse our graduation once again, and I will hear my poem changed, but sitting here now, looking out at the city between the sentences and even knowing that I have been as complacent and faceless as the rest, I still do not understand why he had to change it so terribly. In fact, knowing that we graduate tomorrow, the poem seems strangely fitting. Even after all these years I can remember it.

Between we have that gap
Between all the ways we start
And all the ways we finish
There is a space,
And whether we fail
Or whether we pass
Still, between we have that gap.

Two grotesque gargoyles
Birth and Death
Stand to either side,
And, enigmatic, view the gap

And leave no place to hide.
One with laughter,
One with tears,
They look and look all day.
As we poor mortals
Pass the gap
With trembling
And with fears.

But violets grow
in the flower pot,
And roses blow
in the window box.
We, too, can bloom and blow
in the wind with grace.
Yet still between we have that space.
Still between we have that gap.

This morning the city takes little notice of the auspicious events about to take place, and even imagining that the circle of my window is a porthole, and that I am on a ship newly come into harbour, does not seem to make the city worth looking at. We must return to another day, many years ago. The last wet wind of spring, or perhaps it was the first dry wind of summer, was blowing. How inadequate my descriptions are. It comes to me now that I have been trying all this time to say how this day came about. I think I have failed, and all that is left for me to do is name the time and place: today is the day when the graduates rehearse their graduation at Longview High School.

Because I passed my early entrance exams I had not been attending school since Christmas, but I had been appearing once or twice a week to work on the yearbook. It was a dress rehearsal, and Billy, myself, and the rest of the Latin Choir were dressed in our togas. As we walked towards the auditorium door Billy lagged behind.

It seems that I have no choice but to turn and go back to him,

and it is too late for you, gentle reader, to say anything about it. At some earlier point you might have stood beneath my window and waved up to me, but now the frost has cut away my view of the street. It is as though I am looking through the eyepiece of a telescope, and everything but the rehearsal is far away. Of course, you might pick up a stone from the bluff and rattle it on my eaves, or wrap a message around it and throw it through my window, but we both know you are too insubstantial for that. You are like the portraits that hang in the main hall. For a moment, pretend legs as I have pretended your existence, and join Billy and me. Stare up at yourself staring out over the main hall. Does your disembodied condition surprise you? With all the world from which to choose how did you become this way?

Mrs. Badker calls us from the auditorium door. Billy shifts his toga and looks one last time at the pictures. One last time he plays off their blank faces, "De salutari mortui." We walk down the hall, into the auditorium, and towards the stage. The graduates who are not participating in the ceremony sit in the chairs where their mothers and fathers will sit on graduation night. I must leave you here with the rest of the audience. I must go up to the stage and look back down upon you as you sit here, being as inarticulate as the creaking of fold-down chairs.

For once are you nervous to have this audience of one looking back upon you? I do not think that you are nervous. You are part of a sea of faces, and one part of the sea cannot drown in another part of itself. Although I cannot see you clearly, I think I know you very well.

Are you one of those readers who likes a good story with plenty of action? I have heard you talking many times in coffee shops, and

libraries, and city parks about what you want from a story. Always you are talking too loudly. If that is who you are, then why are you still here? Perhaps you remain in the hopes that Billy will slip from the roof, or perhaps you think that I will push him. I am afraid I cannot tell you what will happen. I am truly afraid, because I do not yet know, myself. Or are you one of those readers who reads compulsively, and if it were not this then it would be a cereal box or a newspaper? If that is who you are, then it is no surprise to me that you are still here following me, line after line. I welcome your presence with great understanding because I know your plight. Or have you taken an English course or two at the university and know all about first person narrators? Yes, I know you very well. You are complacent and armed with the sure knowledge of category. I would envy you your certainty, but I know that it is a lie. I have learned that it is a lie. There are no such categories as narration, plot, characterization, and on and on. There never were. Look down at the floor at your feet. All the games are neatly laid out on the auditorium hardwood. There are green lines for volleyball, and blue lines for basketball, and red lines for badminton, and from where you sit it may seem perfectly clear, but from here on the stage I can see there is a wilderness of lines crossing and recrossing each other like some insane blueprint, or a child's scrawl. You may choose whichever path you like, but sooner or later it will cross another, and then another. Sooner or later it will lead you to confusion.

It does not matter who you are, and you may laugh at what is about to happen, but please do not leave me. I see clearly now why I could not abandon the thought of an audience. I have followed Billy for so long, and I have looked at him in every way I can, trying to make sense

of it all. Please listen. I have been trying to make it mean something. I have been trying TO UNDERSTAND. The only thing left for me now is to type this to the end, and if I fail to understand it, then it is all up to you. I do not care if you are imaginary or real. Please sit up straight. Please listen. Jennifer Burdock is beginning her valedictory address, and I must take my place behind her in the choir. In her hands is a copy of her speech and a newly printed yearbook which contains my first and last publication.

"Honoured teachers, Ladies and Gentlemen, Proud Parents, and Fellow Graduands." Wearing the unaccustomed gown and having her hair pinned up, Jennifer Burdock has stepped out of the usual high school notions of beauty or non-beauty, and for the first time in her life feels an attention that is almost admiring.

"We are to look upon a new vista. This evening we put aside the task of student, and take up the labour of our forefathers. While this is not a task we take lightly, still we can face it bravely, knowing we are well prepared. Now is the time for us to stop and think of the too few years we have spent in these halls."

The snort of laughter from the back row of the auditorium is undoubtedly from Gunther Houghton who has spent more than a few years trying to graduate.

"Sheltered by these walls we have grown. The subjects we have taken may have been literature, or social studies, or biology . . ." At the mention of biology the back row shuffles and snickers.

"But the lessons we have learned have been about Life. In years to come we may follow many different paths. Some of us will go on to university and take up the professional careers of doctor or lawyer or

even teacher. Others will make a life's work of maintaining this great society in a trade, such as that of carpenter or plumber, but all of us will have benefitted from our sojourn at Longview. This is my valedictory theme: The Long View. Let us take the long view of what is to come. Tomorrow we will look with new eyes . . ."

"Flyspecks." This is where it begins, with Billy saying flyspecks. This is where the absurdity truly starts, and this is where even now, years later, I wish I could do the right thing and silence him because he is beginning to upset Jennifer and the results are going to be disastrous. She shuffles her paper and tries again.

"Tomorrow we will look with new eyes and what will we see?"

"Flyspecks." I am too many years late to do anything about it now. Billy is talking without moving his lips, and I turn and tell him that the microphone will pick him up. Mr. Cowper's furious eye discovers me and from his expression I can tell he thinks it is me who is speaking. Jennifer goes on, her voice beginning to tremble, which in other circumstances might suggest she is overcome with what we will see.

"We will see a brave new world, and although it may first seem strange and frightening, we will grow accustomed to it. Although we will want to look back to our old home, even as we look forward to our new one, we can take comfort in the traditions we have learned here, and hold fast to the sure knowledge that those before us also looked out for the first time and saw . . ."

"Flyspecks." The word is clearly articulated this time. I do not have to tell Billy the microphone will pick it up, because we hear "flyspecks" reverberate throughout the hall like the voice of judgement. The fact that something special is occurring has penetrated to the back

row and is announced by various guffaws. One of these guffaws, more ludicrous than the rest, rises above its fellows and echoes through the auditorium, "Who Who Who Who," and the inexplicable thought flashes across my mind that one of them is finally curious about something besides where to get a re-built Chevrolet engine.

Jennifer, blushing furiously, is completely tongue-tied, but her confusion is forgotten in the sudden arrival of a physical education class which bursts through the back door shouting and laughing. As all falls silent, a basketball, trying vainly to sustain the gaiety, slowly bounces towards the stage, hits it, and, like inappropriate laughter, dribbles into silence.

Mr. Cowper immediately takes advantage of the situation to restore control, and steps to the microphone. A lengthy discussion takes place between Mr. McNabb at the back and Mr. Cowper at the front. It is decided that physical exertion will give way to graduation and, the basketball retrieved, the players retreat.

Attention returns to Jennifer Burdock, and she is still visibly upset. After looking closely at her, Mr. Cowper announces that because of limited time, Jennifer will simply read the ending of her address so that the band and the choir can check their cues once again. The audience calms down somewhat. I began to sympathize with Jennifer intensely. My poem is the ending of her speech and I never imagined such an audience when I wrote it. She steps to the microphone once more.

"I would like to end with a poem, for poetry, above all else, can clearly present that mixture of joy and sorrow which we feel tonight. This poem is not well known, nor is its author, but he is a fellow graduate and his words are appropriate to this auspicious event." She

clears her throat. "'Between We Have That Gas,' by Jonathan W. Corning." The moment is frozen. None of us believe what she has just said, not even Jennifer herself. There is only the slightest titter from the audience. I look around for Billy and he is gone. Backstage a door slams shut. The sound propels Jennifer six inches into the air. For a startled person her leap is ridiculously precise. Her hands do not fly up, and she makes no outcry. She simply raises six inches and then returns to earth, and the only evidence that she has moved is the rattle of a hair pin on the floor. All the hair on the right side of her head suddenly tumbles onto her shoulder. Billy's victory is complete because she is too upset now to know what she is reading.

"Between we have that gas.
Between all the ways we start
And all the ways we finish
There is a space.
And whether we fail,
Or whether we pass,
Still between we have that gas."

Mr. McFail, the chemistry teacher, punctuates the stanza with one red-faced, explosive "Ha." He is looking straight at me, but he appears to be at a great distance and it seems that the sound reaches me long after he has opened his mouth. I cannot hear the back row laughing, and I wonder if they think it is a poem about gasoline.

"Two grotesque gargoyles,
Birth and Death,
Stand to either side,
And, enigmatic, view the gas,
And leave no place to hide."

The back row finally breaks into full whooping chorus. The "who who who" begins again as if its owner is excited beyond repair. I am rapidly reciting the poem to myself, changing the p to s to see what

she will say next, and after each line I pause in disbelief until I hear her repeat it after me.

"One with laughter,
One with tears,
They look and look all day
As we poor mortals pass the gas
With trembling and with fears."

The audience is heaving up and down in unison, and the sound is stupendous. I am dimly aware of Mr. Cowper and two other teachers trying to silence them. I am dimly aware of Jennifer Burdock's shoulders heaving up and down as if she were conducting the audience. With amazing strength she refuses to weep openly, and attempting to hold her hair up with one hand, she launches into the last stanza. I am strangely detached, and I admire the way she hides her weeping by making the sobs match the rhythm of the poem.

"But violets grow in the flowerpot
And roses blow in the window box
We, too, can bloom and blow
in the wind with grace
Yet still, between, we have that space
Still, between, we have that gas."

They are not rolling in the aisles, but they are stamping their feet, and gasping for breath, and pounding one another on the back. Suddenly I find myself standing beside Jennifer at the microphone, looking at my poem in the yearbook. Every "p" in "gap" has been changed to "s." It has been printed that way. Billy must have done it when he was proof reading. I begin shouting into the microphone at the audience. "YOU STUPID RED FACED FOOLS THIS IS MY POEM THIS IS MY POEM QUIT LAUGHING I MADE THIS YOU ARE NOT TO LAUGH IT HAS A SERIOUS MEANING QUIT LAUGHING SOMEBODY HAS RUINED MY POEM IT HAS BEEN RUINED SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP."

The auditorium grows very silent. Mr. Cowper moves me away from the microphone. I drop the yearbook on the floor, turn, and walk out.

If you laughed, gentle reader, I am not angry with you. Of course, while writing it down I felt something of what I felt then, but I have grown past that old anger. In fact, I think that even then, as I stepped out into the main hall, the anger had lessened. I had begun to wonder why Billy had done it. I knew without even thinking about it that he had gone to the roof, and that I would follow him to ask him why. Why is the question that, even then, started to grow in the place of the anger. It is a question that has kept on growing.

Now that I am out in the main hall, I see that it has grown as well. It stretches up and up beyond description, and its length seems to unroll until the far end of the hall is only a pinpoint of light. I see now that the main hall truly does ache for stars. The hard smooth arc of the vaulted ceiling, so high up that I must stop and crane my neck, should be laced with constellations. There, in a line straight up from World War I, would be the Pleiades: Alcyone, Merope, Celaeno, Taygeta, Sterope, Electra and Maia. How beautiful they sound on the tongue. What do you think, Billy? Could the daughters of Atlas be my constellation, my picture, instead of the one that hangs further down the hall? The gods have always bribed us with stars. Do you have a price? You could be Orion, on the other side of the hall. You could stand over the archway to the stairs and stretch high up into the vault. Homer said Orion was the tallest and most beautiful of men. Would you accept that picture instead of the other? I think not. I know that even now you are standing on the roof arranging a different kind of immortality for yourself, and

you have no interest for my mumblings in the main hall. It makes no difference if I spend a few more minutes here. This hall has so much time that it has splashed up on the walls and blurred the pictures. A few more minutes will not matter. I must collect my thoughts. The question has grown so large and changed so many times that I am confused, and I cannot afford to be confused now. Unless I am single in my purpose, I will step out on the roof once more and there will be the flags, and the togas, and the traffic, and the choir, and you pointing down Tenth Street, and all the contradictions will rob me of my ending. I will do anything to avoid that. I will even push you off the edge if I have to, Billy. I know it did not happen that way, but I can write it in.

My thoughts will not be collected. They make random echoes in the main hall. They go in two directions at once. Why did you change my poem? How will it all end? I tried to make you a fool and cover you with words. I tried to make you a hero and lift you above the restrictions of this typewriter. Neither way has worked. Where is the sense of it all, Billy? Why have I kept climbing these stairs to this room every morning after it was obvious that it would do no good? There seems to be nothing to do but climb them one last time.

I see that the stairs to the roof have grown as well. There is a new flight for every story that did not work out the way it was supposed to. Where is the country the Student Prince was supposed to rule, Billy? Where did my time go? Where is the quality of light that I wanted to describe, and set down, and preserve? It does not matter any more. Maybe I did not remember it the right way, or maybe I did not write the stories properly, but I am not asking for very much now. Just let there be a proper ending. I do not care if it is happy, or sad, or

dull, or exciting. I am not particular any more. Can you understand? It never mattered to me who Holmes found as long as he found someone.

These stairs have become very long, but still I want to linger. Even now the only key I wish to touch is my backspace. Billy, did you know that when I began these stories I had a title already selected? I was going to call them 'The Corning Chronicles' so that in the author-title catalogue both cards would be together. I thought that perhaps someone like me would come along some day, read them, and say, "Yes. I like those stories by Jonathan W. Corning. I like the time and place he describes, and the world he knew. What a fine world it was." All I wanted to do was to have someone sit down in the library for a while and forget who they were and where they were, and then awake with a start in the bright light and look around at the shelves of books and be happy. But all that has happened is I wonder who I am, and where I am. Is that what the "W" in my name stands for, Billy? I used to say it stood for William, or Warrington, or Wedgely, or whatever seemed to fit the occasion. But now I do not know.

Who am I talking to? Is it Billy, or some not-so-gentle reader grown tired of me, or is it something else? I think I am speaking to the white page, and then I read what the page replies. The answers no longer make any sense. Black and white contradictions come one after another. I do not think I even remember the time I was supposed to describe. All I think of now is this past year, winter to winter, and that no one in the city listens. I can see you now, Billy. Through the window in the bell tower I can see you standing in the wind.

I have followed the trail this far and yet you are still standing there. I know what I have to do. This typewriter is only a

machine, and it will not work forever. I have followed you long enough. There has to be an ending, Billy. All stories have an ending, and that is why stories are better than life. I have to make you jump. I know that you did not jump then, so I must help you now. Please forgive me.

I opened the window and stepped out into the unimaginable stillness. It was as though wind was unknown, as though even the world had stopped turning, as though the city was holding its breath. I opened the window. I stepped through into the light. I said, "Why, Billy? Tell me why."

Slowly he raised his right hand before him in a gesture of benediction. In a voice that range the silence he spoke. "I will not accept this day my daily death. I will not forgive time's trespass. I will not be led to a place of the world's choosing." Gathering his toga together he kicked loose from the building, and a world unto himself, he turned and turned and turned to the earth below. The white of his toga on the green grass seemed like the crumpled wings of a fallen angel.

The words are not right. I should have known that it would not work. I think I have known all along that it is me who has gone off the edge. I have been descending for years, and this typewriter is just the last in a long line of things that I have held onto on the trip down. No black and white magic can hide what really took place. What difference does it make?

I pushed the window open. I could hear strains of "Gaudeamus Igitur" from the choir in the auditorium, and the melody slipped in and out between the noise of traffic. The soprano tolled up equally with a car horn from Center Street. Leaning down, I stepped over the sill and

out into the light. The wind pushed against me. My toga was suddenly cool against my skin like the sheets on the far side of the bed on a hot summer night. The wind seemed to rise, and it caught the material like a sail. The school flags unfurled and began to clap. Below I heard the physical education class run into the courtyard, shouting and laughing. The slap of their running shoes on the cement rose up indistinguishable from the snapping of our togas and the flags in the wind. I could smell the newly budding trees that waved below me in gold-green confusion of motion. "Why, Billy? Tell me why."

His hand raised up and he pointed down Tenth Street. He stood there beautiful and tall, his hair blown up into points. Without turning he said, "Smile, Jonathan. They're taking our picture."

From down on Tenth Street, where two people stood behind a tripod and camera, the wind rose again, and it made the tree tops bow to Billy. My toga billowed up over my face, and I knelt down awkwardly, trying to smooth it back in place.

At the east end of the main hall of Longview High School is the last year of graduation pictures before the plaques escape into the sunshine of the new wing. If you look very closely at the picture of the school in the center you can see two figures on the roof. One of them is tall and upright, almost indistinguishable from the school flags which are unfurled in the wind. The other figure is mis-shapen and bent over.

As for myself, I do not need to make such a pilgrimage. Most days I can see those two figures staring down at me from every building I pass.

EPILOGUE

This morning the city is covered with snow. The endings we deserve finally arrive. It is undeniably the first real snow of winter. A white, thick blanket completely hides the refuse along the river banks and alleyways and makes the world seem very clean. I have always thought that visual descriptions of snow are inappropriate. Above all else, it is silent, and those sounds which are not absorbed by it are muted. The sounds are there, but they lack any individuality so that if pressed to say what you hear you can only reply, "Silence." It is like tissue paper being crinkled near the ear, or the sea in a sea shell. Yes. That is a good thought. Snow turns the city into a giant sea shell, and you can hear whatever you want in it. I have been picking out words and echoes long enough. Today I choose to simply hear the silence, and the silence tells me that everything outside my window is white and pure.

Perhaps I feel that snow is more auditory than visual because this morning I cannot see it. My window is finally frosted over. It has become perfectly white. As I said, we get the endings we deserve. It was a shock to come up this morning to a white window. I think that at first I was slightly unsettled by it, but now I see that it is just right. The light is dim here, and the only sound I can hear now is this typewriter. I feel I have earned my peace and quiet. I am typing this only because so long ago I said I would write an epilogue. As soon as this bit of business is out of the way I will let it go.

My window is quite beautiful. I have a vague memory of some childhood poem about Jack Frost and seeing Moscow burning in the frost crystals. I wish I could remember it because it would be just right for

today. I can see everything that I need to see in my window. All the stories that I have tried to write in the black and white are represented in the frost far more perfectly. In the bottom right hand corner is the castle where the Student Prince was to live. Frost crystals are far more elegant than stone. Higher up to the left is the Cafe Lido, and in frost it does not seem so very far away from the Eiffel Tower. Near the center Valgard Jenson is throwing examination papers into the empty quadrangle, and each paper is perfectly crystalline. All the stories are there and they are so much more perfect than when they were in black and white. There. The sun touches the window. I can see a portrait of Billy and the points of his hair are touched to silver fire.

It is so silent here. If I were speaking I would be whispering. This typewriter is too noisy.

There. A white space on the page. I have been pressing the keys so quietly and slowly that the carriage moved, but no mark or noise was made.

There again. It is so slow that I have forgotten what I wrote

was it my ending

and there white and silent